



# Subject Lessons

Hegel, Lacan, and the  
Future of Materialism

Edited by  
Russell Sbriglia and  
Slavoj Žižek

## SUBJECT LESSONS

**Series Editors**

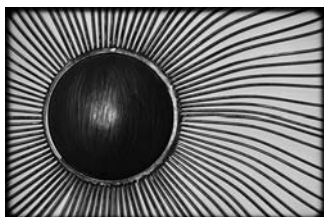
Slavoj Žižek

Adrian Johnston

Todd McGowan

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*diaeresis*



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## SUBJECT LESSONS





# Subject Matters

Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek

The Subject's Second Death; or,  
Materialism, Then and Now

When it comes to materialism, the humanities and social sciences are currently undergoing a transition. From the 1980s up to the present, materialist inquiry across a number of different disciplines has been predominantly “culturalist” in nature.<sup>1</sup> Informed above all by Louis Althusser’s and Michel Foucault’s respective theories of ideological interpellation and discursive formation, cultural materialism holds that subjects are by-products of their respective cultural milieus—epiphenomena of socio-symbolic networks and matrices, ideological state apparatuses, and disciplinary techniques and epistemes. As Fredric Jameson long ago pointed out, the result of this deconstruction of “the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual” has been “the ‘death’ of the subject itself . . . and the accompanying stress, whether as some new moral ideal or as empirical description, on the *decentering* of that formerly centered subject or psyche.”<sup>2</sup> To take Jameson’s own field of literary studies as a case in point, since the cultural turn—a turn that Jameson himself played a significant role in helping to bring about—it has long been commonplace for literary critics to make assertions such as the following, which comes from the opening sentence of a recent essay on Edgar Allan Poe: “authors are made, not born, fashioned by a subtle process embedded in the systems of production and distribution that constitute print culture.”<sup>3</sup> As Todd McGowan points out, what most stands out about a statement like this today is “the extent to which it doesn’t stand out.” Such statements “sound commonsensical to contemporary ears”; they are the conventional wisdom, not only in literary and cultural studies, but throughout the humanities and social sciences in general.<sup>4</sup>

Of late, however, cultural materialism has begun to come under fire—not primarily from the domains of literary and cultural studies, though, for which historicism remains the regnant methodology (if only tacitly so), but from the domains of political theory and philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

Born out of a vitalist tradition whose key figures include Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gilles Deleuze, recent constellations of materialist and realist thought such as actor-network theory, new materialism, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology have begun to call into question the continued relevance of cultural materialism, especially as regards its political efficacy.

For instance, in the introduction to their influential collection *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010), Diana Coole and Samantha Frost emphasize that they, along with the book's other contributors, are "summoning a new materialism in response to a sense that the radicalism of the dominant discourses which have flourished under the cultural turn"—above all the discourse of social constructivism—"is now more or less exhausted." As they continue, though such discourses have "contributed considerable insight into the workings of power over recent years," the "allergy to 'the real' . . . [that is] characteristic of [their] more linguistic or discursive forms—whereby overtures to material reality are dismissed as an insidious foundationalism—has had the consequence of dissuading critical inquirers from the more empirical kinds of investigation that material processes and structures require." Indeed, such discourses, they conclude, have become especially "inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics" in our current neoliberal era—an era defined not only by late-capitalist global political economy, but also by manmade global climate change, the latter of which has been the leading factor behind proposals to designate our current geological epoch the "Anthropocene."<sup>6</sup> New materialists, then, would like materialism to return to the study of matter as such. Yet the matter to which they would have us return is a far cry from what Coole and Frost characterize as "substantialist Cartesian or mechanistic Newtonian accounts of matter" as "simply passive or inert."<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, new materialists understand matter as "possessing its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directedness," the result being that matter is "no longer imagined . . . as a massive, opaque plenitude but is recognized instead as indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways." In a word, as Coole and Frost put it, in what might very well be considered the slogan or mantra not only of new materialism proper but of the various new materialisms and realisms mentioned above, "'matter becomes' rather than . . . 'matter is.'"<sup>8</sup>

Another recent influential collection likewise seeks to combat cultural materialism's "allergy to 'the real'": Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman's *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (2011). For Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, the primary attribute of cultural materialism is its "anti-realism"—an anti-realism characterized, in

their view, by a “preoccupation with such issues as death and finitude, an aversion to science, a focus on language, culture, and subjectivity to the detriment of material factors, an anthropocentric stance towards nature, a relinquishing of the search for absolutes, and an acquiescence to the specific conditions of our historical thrownness.”<sup>9</sup> Claiming that cultural materialism’s obsessive focus on “texts, discourse, social practices, and human finitude” has not only become “tiresome” and “repetitive” but, more importantly, has “reached a point of decreasing returns,” Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman—similar to Coole and Frost—assert that cultural materialism is not merely ill equipped but altogether “incapable of confronting” contemporary developments such as “the ecological crisis, the forward march of neuroscience, the increasingly splintered interpretations of basic physics, and the ongoing breach of the divide between human and machine.”<sup>10</sup> They thus seek to counter the cultural turn with their own “speculative turn,” a turn “toward reality itself,” toward “speculating once more about the nature of reality independent of thought and of humanity more generally.”<sup>11</sup> This turn toward reality as a realm of being independent of human thought and representation—which is what these speculatists mean by the terms “realism” and “materialism”—is what most characterizes the object-oriented ontology of which two of the collection’s editors, Bryant and Harman, are leading figures.<sup>12</sup>

The editors of and contributors to the present collection are largely in agreement with these critiques of the cultural turn. Indeed, one of this book’s editors has been making the case against cultural materialism (usually under the term “historicism”) for more than a quarter-century.<sup>13</sup> Yet an issue arises when we realize that the primary target of the aforementioned new materialisms and realisms is ultimately less cultural materialism in particular (which, after all, is a late-twentieth-century development) than modern philosophy in general, in the form of the Cartesian conception of subjectivity à la the cogito, especially as radicalized by Kant. To take new materialism and object-oriented ontology as our primary examples, for adherents of these two schools of thought the true enemy is not culturalism but rather what Quentin Meillassoux has termed “correlationism,” “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other”—the idea, in other words, that it is “[im]possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another.”<sup>14</sup> Meillassoux traces correlationism back to Kant, who in limiting human knowledge to the phenomenal realm, the realm of the “sensible” or “sensuous,” rejected any possibility of knowing objects as they are “in-themselves.” Insofar as “the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of *correlation*,” the primary target of

new materialism and object-oriented ontology is subjectivity. Whereas prior to Kant “one of the principal problems of philosophy was to think substance,” following Kant philosophy has primarily consisted of trying to think subject.<sup>15</sup> It is this grounding of modern philosophy in “thinking subject” that new materialism and object-oriented ontology above all aim to overturn.

To take Jane Bennett and the aforementioned Levi Bryant as respective ambassadors of new materialism and object-oriented ontology, it is only by “elid[ing] the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its conditions of possibility, and its boundaries”—in short, by eliding modern philosophy as such—that Bennett, in her new materialist manifesto *Vibrant Matter* (2010), is able “to present human and nonhuman actants on a less vertical plane than is common,” to “‘horizontaliz[e],” as she puts it elsewhere, “the ontological plane.”<sup>16</sup> Bennett’s reason for committing this elision, she explains, is that “the philosophical project of naming where subjectivity begins and ends is too often bound up with fantasies of a human uniqueness in the eyes of God, of escape from materiality, or of mastery of nature,” adding that even in the cases where this project isn’t bound up in such fantasies, it nonetheless “remains an aporetic or quixotic endeavor.”<sup>17</sup> Bryant’s object-oriented ontology manifesto *The Democracy of Objects* (2011), in which he attempts to establish a “flat ontology” according to which “there is only one type of being: objects,” likewise depends on a bypassing of modern philosophy as such—and for similar reasons.<sup>18</sup> Looking to overthrow the binary between subject and object typical of virtually all post-Cartesian philosophy—a “two world schema” under which “the question of the object” is subtly yet ineluctably “transformed into the question of how and whether we *know* objects”—Bryant seeks to establish ontology rather than epistemology as “first philosophy” so that we might, in turn, establish “a finally subjectless object.”<sup>19</sup> As Bryant sees it, as long as we remain enthralled by the “epistemic fallacy” according to which the “question of the object” always becomes “a question of whether or not we adequately represent the object”—what, in effect, constitutes another definition of correlationism—the object will remain always already ontologically unavailable.<sup>20</sup> Under Bryant’s “realist ontology,” by contrast—an ontology that, like Bennett’s “thing-power” materialism, aims to counter the “thoroughly anthropocentric” grounding of modern philosophy—not only do objects cease to be mere constructions or representations of human subjects, but so too does the subject become merely “one object among many others,” one object “among the various types of objects that exist or populate the world, each with their own specific powers and capacities,” the result being an “ontological egalitarianism,” a “democratiz[ation of] being.”<sup>21</sup>

As these glimpses into their proximate projects suggest, whatever their differences from cultural materialism, the materialisms and realisms that Bennett and Bryant advocate alongside Coole, Frost, and Harman (as well as others like Rosi Braidotti, Manuel DeLanda, Steven Shaviro, Timothy Morton, and Karen Barad, to name but a handful) nonetheless not only share in but also *advance* the cultural materialist project of placing the subject under erasure. To return to the claim from Jameson with which we began, just as cultural materialism seeks to decenter the formerly centered subject, so too do these new materialisms and realisms, in the words of Bryant, aim at “decentering . . . the subject” from its “privileged, central, or foundational place within philosophy and ontology.”<sup>22</sup> What’s more, they aim to do so according to both of the rationales that Jameson associates with cultural materialism: as “some new moral ideal” (i.e., as a check on “human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption”)<sup>23</sup> and as “empirical description” (i.e., humans are merely one of many “empirical actors within a material environment of nature, other bodies, and the socioeconomic structures that dictate where and how they find sustenance, satisfy their desires, or obtain the resources necessary for participating in political life”).<sup>24</sup>

To thus invoke a famous Lacanian notion, we might say that with the advent of the new materialisms and realisms, the subject dies a “second death.”<sup>25</sup> Or does it? Let us recall once more Jameson’s point about cultural materialism having brought about the decentering of the formerly centered subject, with “subject” here understood in the sense of “the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual.” This is precisely the figure of the subject against which the new materialisms and realisms likewise take aim—a subject which, as Coole and Frost explain, “in distinction from the passivity of matter, modern philosophy has variously portrayed . . . as [a] rational, self-aware, free, and self-moving agent.” In short, as with cultural materialists, the subject targeted by new materialists and realists is “the thinking subject: the *cogito* (I think) that Descartes identified as ontologically other than matter.”<sup>26</sup> This, however, is categorically *not* the figure of the subject with which the contributors to this volume are concerned, for such a subject was already decentered long ago, first, by German Idealism, and then by psychoanalysis. Indeed, we might very well say that these two deaths of the subject—its cultural/discursive death, on the one hand, and its new materialist/realist death on the other—both come too late, both “flog a dead horse,” as it were, for idealist and psychoanalytic notions such as “tarrying with the negative,” the “night of the world,” the “cunning of reason,” the “unconscious,” and the “death drive” (to name but a few) had already done the work of killing off the *cogito* model of subjectivity.

From the Lacano-Hegelian standpoint—the standpoint that grounds all of the essays collected herein—the maxim of the subject is not “I think, therefore I am,” but rather, as Lacan famously formulates it in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” “I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking.” Somewhat surprisingly for the often infuriatingly cryptic *Écrits*, Lacan proceeds to clarify this maxim by rephrasing it as follows: “I am not, where I am the plaything of my thoughts; I think about what I am where I do not think I am thinking.”<sup>27</sup> The crucial idea here is that of being the plaything of one’s thoughts, the idea, as Freud earlier articulated it, that “the ego is not master in its own house,” which means that subjectivity/subjectivation concerns not the ego but the unconscious.<sup>28</sup>

Contrary, then, to the new materialists and realists, what the contributors to this collection mean by the term “subject” is not the conscious or consciously thinking subject—the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual likewise targeted by cultural materialism—but, rather, the unconscious subject, or, more precisely, the subject of the unconscious. Though, in opposition to the new materialists and realists, we insist on the necessity of continuing to “think subject” for any robust materialism or realism going forward, the subject that we would continue to think is not the (consciously) thinking subject, but the subject thought by the unconscious, the subject (un)born of the fact not only, as Freud discovered, that “the unconscious thinks,” but, in a further Lacanian twist, that “*it is only the unconscious that thinks*.”<sup>29</sup> For, as Mladen Dolar explains, though unconscious thought is “thought without being or substance” as well as “without an ‘I,’” it is nonetheless “not without a subject.”<sup>30</sup> And this non-substantial subject—a subject whose ontology, as Bruce Fink wonderfully characterizes it, is that of a “being-in-the-breach,” a subject that “*exists . . . yet remains beingless*”—is precisely the subject to which the essays in this collection attend, a subject that Lacan termed a “subject in the real.”<sup>31</sup>

### Allergy to the Real: Hegel, Lacan, and Object a Ontology

In some regards, the Lacano-Hegelian dialectical materialism both theorized and practiced throughout this present collection is, as Adrian Johnston has noted elsewhere, “uncannily proximate” to the aforementioned new materialisms and realisms.<sup>32</sup> For instance, similar to the Deleuzo-Spinozian mantra that “matter becomes,” the contributors to this volume, following Hegel and Lacan, maintain that reality is ontologically

incomplete. Though Lenin remains a crucial figure in the dialectical materialist tradition, recent discoveries in quantum physics such as black holes and quarks, as well as theoretical inferences regarding “dark matter,” force us to reject what, in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, he proposed as the minimal philosophical definition of materialism: the assertion of an objective reality existing independently of the human mind, without any further qualification.<sup>33</sup> Like the new materialists and realists, Lacano-Hegelian dialectical materialists hold that materialism today has nothing to do with the assertion of the inert density of matter. Such a naive notion of fully constituted material reality as the sole true reality outside our minds, of material reality as “all,” relies on the overlooked exception of material reality’s transcendental constitution, an exception about which we will have more to say below. Going forward, the minimal definition of materialism hinges on the admission of a gap between what Schelling called Existence and the Ground of Existence: prior to fully existent reality, there is, to employ the Lacanian language of sexuation, a chaotic “non-all” (*pas-tout*) proto-reality, a pre-ontological, virtual fluctuation of a not yet fully constituted Real. In short, from the dialectical materialist standpoint, the true formula of materialism is that material reality is *non-all*.<sup>34</sup>

Crucial to note here is the fundamental difference between the assertion that “everything is matter”—an assertion that relies on its constitutive transcendental exception (as in the case not only of Lenin, but also, as we will discuss at greater length below, of Bennett and Bryant, all of whom fail to account for the very position of enunciation of the subject whose mind “reflects” matter)—and the assertion that “there is nothing which is not matter,” an assertion which, with its other side, “not-All is matter,” opens up the space for the account of material phenomena. What this means is that a truly radical materialism is non-reductionist: far from claiming that “everything is matter,” it confers upon “immaterial” phenomena a specific positive non-being.

Yet whereas new materialists and realists take the non-all of material reality, matter’s “becoming,” as a prompt to stage a Spinozian return “from subject back to substance”—a posthumanist reversion to a pre-modernist ontology that endeavors to reenchant the world by attending to what Harman characterizes as the “volcanic force[s]” harbored within objects, their “smoldering volcanic core”—for the Lacano-Hegelian dialectical materialist, the fact that material reality is non-all, ontologically incomplete, entails—indeed, necessitates—a doubling down on the Hegelian insistence that “substance is also subject.”<sup>35</sup> We are referring here, of course, to the famous passage from the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which Hegel claims that “everything turns on grasping



and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*.”<sup>36</sup> As Johnston glosses this passage, Hegel’s claim that “substance is also subject” means that “material being, as incomplete and inconsistent, contains within itself the potentials for the creative genesis of modes of subjectivity exceeding this same ontological foundation,” what Kant would term the subject’s “epigenesis,” the subject’s actualization of the transcendental frame within the phenomenal realm, within the sensible, “concrete” experience of reality.<sup>37</sup> This is why the self-limitation of phenomena, the fact that the phenomenal field is *in itself* never “all,” never a complete, consistent whole, is strictly correlative to subjectivity as such. In other words, the hole in reality, the self-limitation of the phenomenal that renders matter un-whole, leaving it in a “virtual” state of perpetual becoming (to strike a somewhat Deleuzean note), is not simply the excess of the In-itself, what Harman characterizes as the “withdrawn,” volcanic core of objects;<sup>38</sup> rather, the hole in reality, the inaccessibility of the transcendent In-itself, is a result of the inscription of the perceiving subject into reality.

In short, *the hole in reality is the subject*. We reach the In-itself not by tearing away subjective appearances and trying to isolate “objective reality” as it is “out there,” independently of the subject. The more we try to isolate reality “as it is in itself,” independently of the way we relate to it, the more this In-itself falls back into the domain of the transcendently constituted, always already caught in the transcendental circle. But this circle can be broken: the In-itself is not “out there” but is instead discernible in the very cuts that separate different spheres of the transcendently constituted reality, the cuts that make every figuration of “external reality” inconsistent, thwarted, non-all. *And these cuts are the sites of the intervention of subjectivity into reality*. The In-itself inscribes itself precisely into the subjective excess, the subjective gap or inconsistency, that opens up a hole in reality.

From this perspective, the truly radical materialist move is not to return to a Tolkienesque enchanted world full of magical forces in which the subject is merely one among countless other vital objects—a move that embraces a Spinozian flat ontology which Hegel, to again invoke the preface to the *Phenomenology*, would liken to “the night in which . . . all cows are black.”<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, the truly radical materialist move is to fearlessly think through the consequences of *rejecting* “objective reality” and doubling down on the Hegelian theory of subjectivity, of the subject not as a hubristic mega-actant actively positing all the world of fundamentally passive objects (the all-too-typical misunderstanding/caricature of the nature of post-Cartesian, idealist subjectivity), but rather as the void

of absolute negativity, or what Hegel, in an iconic passage from his *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, poetically characterizes as the aforementioned “night of the world,” the withdrawal of the self from the world of entities into the abyss that is the core of the “pure Self.”<sup>40</sup>

What is crucial to note here is that Hegel explicitly posits this “night of the world” as a pre-ontological, pre-symbolic Real: the symbolic order, the universe of the Word, Logos—in short, what we know as “reality”—can only emerge from the experience of this abyss, from this “tarrying with the negative,” to invoke another of the aforementioned iconic phrases from the *Phenomenology*.<sup>41</sup> As Hegel explains, the “immediate inwardness” of pure Self, of sheer negativity, that we confront when we enter the night of the world “must also enter into existence [*Daseyn*], become an object, so that . . . this innerness is made external—a return to *being* [*Seyn*].”<sup>42</sup> In other words, the radical negativity of the subject, “pure Self,” must manifest itself, must become “objectified,” in reality, in the phenomenal realm. In this sense, the subject is indeed an object, as the new materialists and realists claim, but a very particular, very peculiar kind of object, a strange object that, insofar as it is *in the subject more than the subject itself*, is constitutive of subjectivity as such. This object is that which Lacan termed *objet petit a* (“object small a”), the object-cause of desire, the object-in-subject that operates as a Real cut in reality that is nonetheless responsible for maintaining the consistency of reality, for holding reality together.<sup>43</sup>

As defined by Lacan, the *objet petit a* is a strange object which is not only lacking, never fully here, always eluding the subject, but which is in itself nothing but the embodiment, the materialization, of a lack. That is to say, since the subject is the self-appearing of nothing, its “objective correlative” can only be a strange object whose nature is to be the embodiment of nothing, an “impossible” object, an object the entire being of which is an embodiment of its own impossibility, an object whose status is that of an anamorphosis, a distorted projection.<sup>44</sup> Like the distorted skull that lies at the bottom-center of Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*—Lacan’s classic example of the *objet petit a* as anamorphosis<sup>45</sup>—the *objet petit a* is that part of the picture which, when looked at in a direct, straightforward way, when “rightly gazed upon,” appears as a meaningless stain, but which, when looked at sideways, when “eyed awry,” acquires the contours of a known object. We are invoking here another iconic artistic instance of the *objet petit a*, arguably the most beautiful instance of it in all of literature, that moment in Shakespeare’s *Richard II* when Bushy, the king’s servant, tries to comfort Queen Isabel, who is worried about Richard while he is away on a military campaign:

Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows  
 Which shows like grief itself but is not so.  
 For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears,  
 Divides one thing entire to many objects—  
 Like perspectives, which, rightly gazed upon,  
 Show nothing but confusion; eyed awry,  
 Distinguish form. So your sweet majesty,  
 Looking awry upon your lord's departure,  
 Find shapes of grief more than himself to wail,  
 Which, looked on as it is, is naught but shadows  
 Of what it is not.<sup>46</sup>

This is the *objet petit a*: an entity that has no substantial consistency, which is in itself, “as it is,” “nothing but confusion,” “naught but shadows / Of what is not,” but which acquires a definite shape when “eyed awry,” when gazed upon from a standpoint distorted by the subject's fears and desires. As such, the *objet petit a* is a weird, alien object which is nothing but the inscription of the subject itself into the field of objects in the guise of a stain that acquires form only when part of this field is anamorphically distorted by the subject's desire. This “stain in the picture,” the point of impossibility in every phenomenal field, is not a sign of transcendence that escapes the subject, but the very stand-in for the subject itself, the inscription of the subject into the picture.

To thus return to Hegel's claim that “everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*,” what happens in the passage from substance to subject is a kind of reflexive reversal: we pass from the secret core of an object inaccessible to other objects (the “withdrawal” thesis of Harman and Bryant's object-oriented ontology) to inaccessibility as such; *the subject is nothing but its own inaccessibility, its own failure to be substance*—a failure represented by Lacan via the matheme \$, the graphic representation of the subject's “bar-ring.” Herein resides Lacan's achievement: the standard psychoanalytic theory conceives of the unconscious as a psychic substance of subjectivity (the notorious hidden part of the iceberg harboring all of our deepest, darkest desires, fantasies, and so on), while Lacan *de-substantializes the unconscious* (for him, the Cartesian cogito is the Freudian subject), thereby bringing psychoanalysis to the level of modern subjectivity.<sup>47</sup>

And it is here that the new materialisms and realisms evince their own “allergy to the real”: the Lacanian Real. For it is only against the background of the “little piece of the Real,” the *objet petit a*, that we come to grasp not only in what precise sense the subject effectively *is* an object, but also, in a properly Hegelian dialectical reversal, in what sense object-

substance is subject. From the Lacano-Hegelian standpoint, the true way to be a consequent materialist is not to directly include the subject into reality as merely one object among others, but to bring out the Real of the subject, the way the emergence of subjectivity functions as a cut in and of the Real. More than anything else, it is this allergy to, this elision of, the Real that renders Deleuzo-Spinozian materialism and realism and Lacano-Hegelian dialectical materialism, whatever their uncanny proximity in other regards, not only incompatible but utterly incommensurable, for in contrast to the former's commitment to an object-oriented ontology, the latter, in its attention to the Real, is committed to what Joan Copjec has dubbed an "object *a* ontology," or, as Alenka Zupančič puts it, an "object-disoriented ontology," "an ontology . . . 'disoriented' by . . . the object *a*."<sup>48</sup>

To thus return once more to the relationship between subject and substance, the subject is not a substance that withdraws/appears; rather, the subject is appearance (appearing-to-itself) which autonomizes itself and becomes an agent against its own substantiality. "Subjectivation," the formation of the subjective space of meaning, is effectively grounded in a closure of the circle of self-recognition—that is, an imaginary obfuscation of a traumatic Real, of the "wound" of antagonism. This wound, however, this trauma, this cut in and of the Real, is *the subject itself at its zero-level*, so that, to paraphrase the famous line from Wagner's *Parsifal* ("the wound can be healed only by the spear that smote it"), *the subject is itself the wound it tries to heal*.<sup>49</sup> This "absolute contradiction," this radical coincidence of opposites—the "wound of nature," the loss of "organic unity," and simultaneously the very activity to heal this wound by way of constructing a universe of meaning; the production of sense with a traumatic core of nonsense; the point of absolute singularity (of the "I" excluding all substantial content) in which universality comes to itself, is "posited" as such—is what defines subjectivity. This abyss of subjectivity is precisely what Hegel means by the "night of the world." In the night of the world, extreme self-withdrawal, the severing of all links with the reality around us, overlaps with our extreme openness to reality: we drop all symbolic screens that filter our access to reality, all protective shields, and risk a kind of total exposure to the disgust of the Real. As to its content, it is a position of radical passivity (of a Kantian transcendental subject suspending its constitution of reality), but as to its form, it is a position of radical activity, of violently tearing oneself out of the immersion into reality: I am utterly passive, but my passive position is grounded in my withdrawal from reality, in a gesture of extreme negativity.

The subject is thus not somehow more actant than objects, an agent that shapes, exploits, and dominates objects. On the contrary, at its most

elementary level, the subject is not an actant at all but a certain gesture of passivization, of passive experience. What Lacan says of the Thing (*das Ding*) in Seminar VII—the same seminar in which he theorizes the *objet petit a* as anamorphosis—is true of the subject as well: the subject is “that which in the Real . . . suffers from the signifier,” its activity a reaction to this basic feature.<sup>50</sup> The subject is a being constituted through its own division, its own splitting, as to the object in it (*objet petit a*), an “extimate” object which stands for the dimension of “death drive,” of a traumatic imbalance, a rooting out that renders man as such “nature sick unto death,” derailed, run off the rails through fascination with a lethal Thing. From this perspective, the true problem is not that the new materialisms and realisms reduce subjectivity to a mere property/quality of one object among many others; the problem, rather, as intimated earlier, is that what these materialisms and realisms understand as “subject” simply doesn’t meet the criteria of the subject. In short, *there is no place for the subject in the new materialisms and realisms.*

To use Bryant as an illustration of this point (though one could just as well use Harman), whereas Bryant insists that “it is necessary to staunchly defend the autonomy of objects or substances, refusing any reduction of objects to their relations, whether these relations be relations to humans or other objects,” for Lacan, the subject is precisely a *non-substantial entity*, an object that is entirely—indeed, is *perforce*—reducible to its relations to other entities.<sup>51</sup> As he asserts in Seminar XX: “The reciprocity between the subject and object *a* is total.”<sup>52</sup> From the Lacanian perspective, a truly radical materialism or realism would not insist upon the absolute autonomy of objects, their non-relationality to subjects (as well as other objects). Rather, to invoke another of Lacan’s seminars, Seminar XVIII, a truly radical materialism can only be a dialectical materialism, a materialism according to which the subject is a purely relational entity—indeed, is *nothing but this very relationality*.<sup>53</sup> As an excremental little piece of the Real, a recalcitrant, unsymbolizable remainder of every signifying process, the subject, by way of its fleeting appearance in the form of the *objet petit a*, its ephemeral “being-in-the-breach,” has no positive support of its own. In this regard, the subject’s self-withdrawal or split—in Lacanese, its “barring”—is far more radical than the self-withdrawal of every object split between its appearance (in interaction with other objects) and its substantial content, its withdrawn In-itself: the subject is not just split like every other object between its phenomenal qualities (actualizations) and its inaccessible, virtual In-itself; the subject is divided between its appearance and the void at the core of its being, not between appearance and its hidden substantial ground. This, again, is why, from the Lacano-Hegelian perspective, what new material-

ists and realists understand as “subject” simply fails to meet the criteria of the subject.

And yet, to return to the issue of material reality’s transcendental constitution, even if we approach matters according to the new materialist/realist understanding of the subject, the notion of the subject as merely one object amidst a democracy of object-actants encounters yet another problem: namely, that of failing to account for its own position of enunciation. From where does the subject (understood here as the ego or individual) who deploys these object-oriented ontologies, these thing-power materialisms, speak? From what standpoint? Such theories obviously cannot be uttered from the position of merely one object among others. Take, for instance, the “Nicene Creed for would-be vital materialists” with which Bennett concludes her *Vibrant Matter*:

I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually *doing things*. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests.<sup>54</sup>

What vibrates in vibrant matter is its immanent life force or its soul (in the precise Aristotelian sense of the active principle immanent to matter), not subjectivity. Challenging the “partition of the sensible” involved in “parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings),” vital materialism, Bennett asserts, refuses the “quarantines of matter and life” typical of modern philosophy; instead, selves or multiple agents are to be found everywhere in different guises.<sup>55</sup> Yet a basic ambiguity nonetheless persists here: are these vital qualities of material bodies the result of our (the human observer’s) “benign anthropomorphism,” so that the vitality of matter means that “everything is, in a sense, alive,”<sup>56</sup> or are we effectively dealing with a strong ontological claim asserting a kind of spiritualism without gods, with a way of restoring sacredness to worldliness? If “a careful course of anthropomorphism” can help reveal the vitality of material bodies, it is not clear whether that vitality is a result of our perception being animistic or of an actual asubjective vital power.

Despite attempts like Bennett’s to elide modern philosophy, such ambiguities are deeply Kantian. Indeed, they demonstrate the very impossibility of divesting either materialist or realist inquiry from subjectivity,

for such visions of a democracy of objects in which all objects, including the subject, occupy the same ontological standing are possible only from the standpoint of an (empty) subject. It is in this sense that new materialism and object-oriented ontology both obfuscate the Real of the subject, the cut that *is* the Real. Every quest for direct access to “subjectless objects” that ignores or bypasses this cut/wound that is the subject already has to rely on reality’s transcendental constitution, for the very “hetero-verse” or “pluriverse” of actants posited by those in search of “a finally subjectless object” is itself formed by a certain transcendental vision of reality. The problem with subjectless objects is thus not that they are too objective, neglecting the role of the subject, but that what they describe as a subjectless world of objects is too subjective, already caught within an unproblematized transcendental horizon.

So how can we move beyond this transcendental horizon? Again, we cannot do so by abstracting from our subjectivity and trying to isolate the way things are in themselves, independently of us. Every such attempt fails, since the reality we reach in this way is, as Lacan pointed out, always based on a fantasy which covers up the cut of the Real.<sup>57</sup> We reach the Real only when we reflect on how we fit into the reality of the objects around us, when we reflect on how the Real is not the In-itself of objects beyond our perceptive reach, but rather the very “subjective excess” which distorts our access to reality. It is to the “indivisible remainders” of this subjective excess, to adopt a Schellingian turn of phrase, that the dialectical materialism found throughout this volume will, above all, attend.<sup>58</sup>

## Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism

The essays collected herein are organized into two sections: one on Hegel and philosophical materialism, the other on Lacan and psychoanalytic materialism. Leading off the former is Mladen Dolar’s “What’s the Matter? On Matter and Related Matters.” After providing a brief history of modern philosophical materialism, Dolar proceeds, first, to an examination of Hegel’s materialism—a materialism that hinges on Hegel’s positing of the subject as a rift, a torsion, in substance—and, second, to an examination of Freud’s materialism, his grounding of psychoanalysis on matter that borders on the immaterial (dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue, etc.). From here, Dolar concludes with a consideration of the Lacanian *objet petit a*, a “less than nothing” that, in its reinforcement of both the

Hegelian thesis that “substance is also subject” and the Freudian insistence on the insistence of immaterial matter(s), underscores the shortcomings of new materialist and realist attempts to demote the subject and give all power to the object.

Following Dolar’s chapter is Borna Radnik’s “Subjectivity in Times of (New) Materialisms: Hegel and Conceptualization.” Looking closely at Hegel’s engagement with the question of conceptualization in both the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Radnik argues that, contrary to the new materialisms and realisms that have appeared since Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism, a Hegelian-inflected dialectical materialism, as a “materialism with the Idea,” avoids self-reflexive contradiction by virtue of its unification of the concept (subject) with objectivity (substance). As an infinite, dynamic movement, the Hegelian Idea is a transformative activity, an immanent dialectic—the movement of subject to substance and substance to subject—and it is precisely its incorporation of this Idea, Radnik contends, that renders dialectical materialism not a regression into a realm of ideals, a subject-oriented ontology that reduces objective reality to mere concepts subsumed within the mind of a finite subject, but rather an acknowledgment of the pivotal role that the conceptual determinations inherent in thought and being play in constituting objective reality to begin with.

Complementing Radnik’s chapter is Todd McGowan’s “Objects after Subjects: Hegel’s Broken Ontology,” in which McGowan argues that it is none other than Hegel’s idealism that constitutes his materialism. McGowan begins by examining the aspect of Hegel’s idealism that most distinguishes it from the subjective idealism of Kant and Fichte: his identification of contradiction in things-in-themselves. As McGowan contends, Hegelian idealism is based on a recognition that while our ideas transcend their material sources, they nonetheless bear the imprint of these sources and reveal them to us, the result being an *objective* idealism in which ideas themselves are responsible for calling attention to the inescapability of materialism. From here, McGowan proceeds to contrast this “broken” ontology of Hegel’s with that of Heidegger and his modern-day disciples, the object-oriented ontologists, concluding that, from the Hegelian perspective, the attempt to place subjects and objects on the same ontological plane will always be philosophically suspect, for though subjects and objects are indeed both “broken,” riven by contradiction, the subject, through the act of thinking and enacting this contradiction, breaks itself.

Delving even further into the materialist core of Hegel’s idealism, Andrew Cole, in “The Nature of Dialectical Materialism in Hegel and Marx,” argues that the Hegelian element—a quantum of thought and



substance that Hegel theorized in an idealist rejoinder to the materialist determinism of the physics and chemistry of his day—constitutes the core of precisely the kind of idealist materialism that would appeal to Marx, even though Marx famously criticized Hegel for (among other things) idealizing materiality, for making what is concrete abstract, and for rendering the real problems of labor and surplus value into airy notions about freedom and the World Spirit. Challenging the accepted wisdom that the mature Marx wised up and brushed off the dusty Hegelianism of his youth in order to adopt a more properly materialist materialism, Cole examines Marx's embrace of Hegelian elemental materialism in both his early and his late works, from his doctoral dissertation to the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*. As Cole demonstrates, Hegel stands right where we wouldn't expect him: not only at the theoretical core of Marx's historical materialism, but also as the very model for a dialectical mode of thinking that Marx always embraced—a dialectical habit of thought that uses the same language, and the same techniques, to parse matter and ideas, materialities and histories, stuff and spirit.

Closing out the section on Hegel and philosophical materialism is Slavoj Žižek's "Intellectual Intuition and *Intellectus Archetypus*: Reflexivity from Kant to Hegel," in which Žižek focuses on the two extremes between which the concept of subjectivity is torn in German Idealism: subjectivity as reflexivity (the power of distance, mediation, tearing apart) and subjectivity as the immediate unity of "intellectual intuition" (the free flow of direct self-awareness in which freedom and necessity, activity and passivity, coincide). In the chapter's first half, Žižek traces the evolution of and contestation between these two positions throughout the German Idealist tradition, from Kant, who rejected intellectual intuition as inaccessible to us finite humans, through Fichte and Schelling, the latter of whom asserted intellectual intuition as the highest organon of philosophy, to Hegel, who overcomes this tension by way of asserting reflexivity itself as the absolute power. In the chapter's second half, Žižek looks at Kant's championing of *intellectus archetypus* ("divine understanding") over *intellectus ectypus* ("human understanding") and Hegel's subsequent critique of this move. As Žižek concludes, for Hegel, the issue is not that of overcoming the limitations of *intellectus ectypus* and passing to *intellectus archetypus* as the intellect which spontaneously generates all particular content out of itself, its form, with no need for external input; rather, Hegel's position is that we should radically shift our perspective on *ectypus* and conceive (what appears as) its limitations as its positive feature.

The book's second section, on Lacan and psychoanalytic materialism, begins with Adrian Johnston's "Fear of Science: Transcendental Materialism and Its Discontents." In a response aimed at recent critiques

of his philosophy of transcendental materialism as a crude positivism and an uncritical science-fetishism, Johnston argues that the “fear of science” characteristic of such critiques—in particular, those by Graham Harman, Lorenzo Chiesa, and Jan De Vos—creates more philosophical problems than it resolves. Reiterating one of the core tenets of transcendental materialism—namely, that one cannot simultaneously be both a true materialist and a science-phobic anti-naturalist—Johnston contrasts transcendental materialism’s anti-reductionist grounding in German Idealist *Naturphilosophie* and Marxian historical materialism with the purportedly materialist ontologies of his critics—ontologies which, by and large, have abstained from engaging the empirical experimental sciences of nature.

Following Johnston’s chapter is Alenka Zupančič’s “Ontology and the Death Drive: Lacan and Deleuze,” a chapter that begins by taking a close look at some of the uncanny resemblances between Lacan’s and Deleuze’s idiosyncratic readings of the death drive (the most notable of these resemblances being that both thinkers reject the standard dualistic understanding of the Freudian drives according to which Eros and Thanatos, the pleasure principle and the death drive, are viewed as competing, opposed principles and insist instead on the primacy of the death drive), but which concludes by zeroing in on the point at which the two are fundamentally incommensurable: the question of the subject. As Zupančič demonstrates, whereas Deleuze’s “realism” implies radical desubjectivation, for Lacan (the effect of) subjectivation is the very instance (or “proof”) of an irreducible Real. In short, the difference between what Deleuze calls “realized Ontology” and what we might call Lacan’s “Real ontology” (or “Real para-ontology”) hinges, above all, on the role that subjectivity plays—or doesn’t play—in each.

Picking up where Zupančič’s chapter leaves off is Nathan Gorelick’s “Why Sex Is Special: Psychoanalysis against New Materialism.” Responding to new materialist dismissals of psychoanalysis as merely another iteration of the metaphysics of human exceptionalism, Gorelick counters that a properly psychoanalytic materialism can critique anthropocentrism (and the Anthropocene) just as stridently as the new materialisms without having to abnegate the “something special” about the human being: the ontological lapse that is sex/sexuality. As Gorelick maintains, holding to the specificity of the human on account of its unique experience of castration—the traumatic encounter with the signifier that splits the subject and lodges the impossible object that would complete it (the *objet petit a*) at the vanishing point of unconscious fantasy—does not imply a hierarchy of valuation which positions human being above or beyond other modes of being. On the contrary, positing sexual difference as

ontological difference forces us to consider how the metaphysics of the subject is insufficient grounds for any ethical relation, including not only human relations, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the possibility of a relation between the human and its nonhuman others, the latter of which, despite the ethical impetus behind much new materialist thought, is precluded by the absorption of the human and nonhuman alike into an affected, undifferentiated sameness.

Further refining Gorelick's critique of new materialist and realist ontologies, Molly Anne Rothenberg's chapter, "Twisting 'Flat Ontology': Harman's 'Allure' and Lacan's Extimate Cause," looks specifically at Harman's concept of "allure," a concept, Rothenberg contends, which functions as the linchpin of recent attempts by Harman to articulate a theory of causality in which causes are close enough to touch their effects without becoming indistinguishable from them. As Rothenberg aims to demonstrate, insofar as Harman's allure constitutes a search for an "extimate" cause, a relation of non-relationality—a cause/relation no better exemplified than by the *objet petit a*—it unwittingly shifts him into Lacanian territory, thereby reinscribing subjectivity at the heart of his putatively flat, desubjectivized ontology.

Though we invoked the famous "looking awry" passage from *Richard II* above as a paradigmatic instance of the *objet petit a*, the collection's final two chapters provide a more sustained engagement between literature and Lacanian psychoanalytic materialism. In the first of these chapters, "Becoming and the Challenge of Ontological Incompleteness: Woolf *avec* Lacan *contra* Deleuze," Kathryn Van Wert interrogates Deleuze's (in)famous positing of Virginia Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway as the "nomadic" quasi-subject par excellence in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Taking Deleuze's celebration of Clarissa's nomadism as paradigmatic of recent neovitalist celebrations of matter's agency, Van Wert focuses instead on another central figure of Woolf's novel, Septimus Smith, a character whose schizophrenia and eventual suicide suggest that, however seductive, libidinally charged visions of matter as emergent or "becoming" not only veer dangerously toward the cheap plenitudes of freedom, but also sidestep the more challenging enigma of ontological incompleteness that is the subject. Against Deleuze's iconic (mis)reading, Van Wert, in shifting attention to the figure of Septimus, interprets Woolf's experiments with the subject (and those of literary modernists more generally) as the inheritance of a Lacanian materialist tradition more attentive to the barred, abyssal nature of material reality, the subjective lack that is the ineluctable counterpart to objective surplus.

Concluding the volume is Russell Sbriglia's "From Sublimity to Sublimation: Hegel, Lacan, Melville," wherein Sbriglia reads Herman Mel-

ville's *Moby-Dick* for the ways in which its prescient depiction of Lacanian sublimation renders manifest the latent materialist core of the Hegelian sublime. Sbriglia begins with a consideration of how, despite what Kant would dub his "fanaticism," Captain Ahab's belief that one must "strike through the mask" of "all visible objects" in order to reach what he characterizes as "the little lower layer" nonetheless reflects a fundamentally Kantian understanding of transcendence according to which the sublime object is merely a material manifestation of the transcendental thing-in-itself. From here, Sbriglia proceeds to an examination of how Ahab's sublimation of *Moby Dick*—his elevation of "a dumb thing" (as the *Pequod's* first mate, Starbuck, deems the White Whale) to the dignity of the Thing—simultaneously inverts this Kantian logic by positing the transcendental as immanent to the material, rather than vice versa. Such an inversion, Sbriglia argues, not only resonates with, but also advances the critique of the Kantian sublime found in Hegel's *Aesthetics*—a critique that defines the thing-in-itself (in Hegel's terminology, the Idea) not as a positive entity existing beyond the material realm, but, rather, as the experience of radical negativity *within* the material realm itself. As Sbriglia concludes, Ahab's sublimation of *Moby Dick* exemplifies better than Hegel himself the central claim of Hegelian aesthetics: namely, that the sublime object is not merely a representation of the Idea; rather, it *is* the Idea.

## Notes

1. In the American academy, a more common term for cultural materialism is "historicism" (or, as it is typically referred to in literary and cultural studies, "new historicism"). Cultural materialism, for instance, is what Joan Copjec means by "historicism" in the subtitle to her book *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994). As she explains at the book's outset: "we are calling historicist the reduction of society to its indwelling network of relations of power and knowledge" (6), a reduction that, in turn, disallows "any reference to a principle or a subject that 'transcends' the regime of power" (7). As is clear from the reference to "power and knowledge," Foucault is for Copjec the arch-historicist.

2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), 15. Though more Barthesian-sounding, evoking Barthes's iconic essay "The Death of the Author," the phrase "death of the subject" is typically associated with Foucault, who proclaimed "dispens[ing] with the constituent subject," "get[ting] rid of the subject itself," to be the very definition of his "genealogy." Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 117.

3. J. Gerald Kennedy, "Inventing the Literati: Poe's Remapping of Ante-

bellum Print Culture,” in *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy and Jerome McGann (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 13. Unsurprisingly, Kennedy unpacks this assertion by way of a brief discussion of Foucault’s iconic essay “What Is an Author?”—published just two years after Barthes’s “The Death of the Author”—in which Foucault (in Kennedy’s words) not only “deconstructs ‘the author’ as a cultural invention, associating the very concept with a ‘privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas,’” but also “declares the death of the author and (in a move endemic to structuralism) asserts the autonomy of the text as a play of signifiers” (13).

With regard to Jameson, not only did his *The Political Unconscious* do much to foster the type of symptomatic reading that cultural materialism would become (in)famous for, but it also gave us the cultural materialist mantra—one that Jameson explicitly proclaimed to be the book’s “moral”—to “Always historicize!” See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

4. Todd McGowan, “The Bankruptcy of Historicism: Introducing Disruption into Literary Studies,” in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Literature but Were Afraid to Ask Žižek*, ed. Russell Sbriglia (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017), 90–91.

5. For more on the continued reign of historicism in literary studies, see McGowan, “The Bankruptcy of Historicism”; and Anna Kornbluh and Benjamin Morgan, “Presentism, Form, and the Future of History,” *b2o* 1, no. 2 (2016). See also the “Manifesto of the V21 Collective,” a collective of which Kornbluh and Morgan are the facilitators: <http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/>.

6. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

7. *Ibid.*, 12–13, 10.

8. *Ibid.*, 10.

9. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 3, 1, 3. Coole and Frost likewise address all of these developments. With regard to quantum and theoretical physics, for instance, they note that with the discovery of black holes and quarks, as well as the theoretical inference of “dark matter,” even “the most ardent realist must concede that the empirical realm we stumble around in does not capture the truth or essence of matter in any ultimate sense and that matter is thus amenable to some new conceptions that differ from those upon which we habitually rely.” Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 11–12.

11. Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy,” 3.

12. As Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman explain, the terms “materialism” and “realism” in their collection’s subtitle, “Continental Materialism and Realism,” are intended to not only “clarify further the nature of the new trends” in conti-

mental philosophy, but to “also preserve a possible *distinction* between the material and the real” (2). With regard to the latter, Harman, for instance, advocates an anti-materialist realism, a “realism without materialism.” See Graham Harman, “Realism without Materialism,” *SubStance* 40, no. 2 (2011): 52–72, and, more recently, his *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2016).

13. See, for instance, Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (New York: Verso, 1991), 101–3; Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 80–82, 184; Žižek, “*Da Capo senza Fine*,” in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (New York: Verso, 2000), 213–62; and Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (New York: Verso, 2001), 218–25. To offer a brief summary, these critiques center on two main failures of historicism: (1) its failure to account for the ahistorical, traumatic kernel of the Real—what Lacan termed the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire (a concept about which we will have much to say in the following section of this introduction)—that returns as the Same throughout all “historical epochs,” disrupting the notion of history’s linear succession (hence Copjec’s claim that historicism not only “proudly professes to be *illiterate in desire*,” but “wants to have nothing to do with desire” [Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 14]); and (2) its failure to account for the historicist’s own position of enunciation—a failure that renders historicism a type of discursive idealism insofar as it leaves uninterrogated the historicist’s unacknowledged presumption to inhabit the position/perspective of a neutral, external observer (to adopt a “God’s-eye view,” as it were) both *for* and *from* which all that happens can be historically relativized.

14. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008), 5.

15. *Ibid.*, 5, 6.

16. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), ix; Bennett, “Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontology,” in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 230. Bennett consciously adopts the terms “actant” and “horizontalize” from Bruno Latour.

17. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.

18. Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities, 2011), 20. Bryant adopts the term “flat ontology” from Manuel DeLanda; see DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2002). Bryant prefers to characterize his philosophical project as object-oriented *onticology* rather than object-oriented ontology, intending the former term (onticology) to distinguish his project from metaphysical ontology.

19. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 16. “Towards a Finally Subjectless Object” is the title of the introductory chapter of *The Democracy of Objects*. Bryant here tropes on Alain Badiou’s notion of “a finally objectless subject.” See Badiou, “On a Finally Objectless Subject,” in *Who Comes after the Subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 24–32.

As Bryant succinctly rehearses it, the question of the object typically goes as follows: “Do we . . . touch the object in its *reality* in our representations, or, rather, do our representations always ‘distort’ the object such that there is no warrant in the claim that our representations actually represent a reality that is out there?” The problem with beginning with such a query, Bryant stresses, is that “the moment we pose the question of objects we are no longer occupied with the question of objects, but rather with the question of the relationship between the subject and the object” (14).

20. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 59, 14. Bryant adopts the term “epistemic fallacy” from Roy Bhaskar; see Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

21. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 34, 19, 22, 20, 280; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2.

22. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 27, 22.

23. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.

24. Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 19.

25. For Lacan’s notion of the “second death,” see his reading of *Antigone* in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 243–87. As Alenka Zupančič similarly points out, “it is significant that even though new materialisms usually take their starting point in rejecting the so-called ‘linguistic turn,’ and all that is labeled ‘structuralism’ and ‘poststructuralism,’ they actually share with them precisely this conviction according to which the ‘subject’ is a rotten apple in the barrel of philosophical concepts.” Alenka Zupančič, *What IS Sex?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017), 119. For a slightly different articulation of this point, see Terry Eagleton, who asserts that, insofar as it “shares post-structuralism’s suspicion of humanism,” new materialism “is really a species of post-structuralism in wolf’s clothing,” Terry Eagleton, *Materialism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016), 11.

26. Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 8.

27. Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 430. Also worth noting here is Lacan’s somewhat different formulation of this maxim in his as of yet unpublished seminars XIV and XV, *La Logique du fantasme (The Logic of Fantasy)* and *L’Acte psychanalytique (The Psychoanalytic Act)*, respectively—a formulation couched in the language and logic of the “*vel* of alienation”—“*ou je ne pense pas ou je ne suis pas*”: “either I am not thinking or I am not.”

28. Sigmund Freud, “A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 17 (London: Hogarth, 1955), 143. As Bruce Fink explains in attempting to differentiate the Lacanian from the Freudian subject, “though Freud grants it the status of an agency (*Instanz*), in Lacan’s version of psychoanalysis the ego is clearly not an active agent, the agent of interest being the unconscious.” Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 37.

29. Mladen Dolar, "Cogito as the Subject of the Unconscious," in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 29.

30. Ibid.

31. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 72, 51–52; Lacan, "Position of the Unconscious," in *Écrits*, 708. Fink's comments come amidst an explanation of Lacan's conception of the subject as "*manque-à-être*," a concept that simultaneously signifies both the subject's "lack of being" and its "wanting to be." As Fink enumerates in lines that bear on our discussion of the non-substantial nature of the subject: "the subject fails to come forth as someone, as a particular being; in the most radical sense, he or she is not, he or she has no being. The subject *exists*—insofar as the word has wrought him or her from nothingness, and he or she can be spoken of, talked about, and discoursed upon—yet remains beingless" (51–52).

32. Adrian Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 319. As Johnston adds, neovitalist materialism is uncannily proximate to Lacano-Hegelian dialectical materialism "in the same way that Spinoza and Hegel are uncannily proximate, with the latter being an immanent, rather than external, critic of the former" (319). Given this uncanny proximity, it is perhaps not surprising that the past decade or so has seen a handful of attempts to establish a rapprochement of sorts between the traditions of Spinoza and Deleuze on one side and Hegel and Lacan on the other. See, for instance, Kiarina Kordela, *\$urplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016); and Gregor Moder, *Hegel and Spinoza: Substance and Negativity* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2017). The classic analysis of the relationship between Hegel and Spinoza is Pierre Macherey's *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

33. Despite the inadequacy of the definition of materialism found therein (a definition according to which even Plato would have to be considered a materialist), Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* nonetheless remains crucial to the dialectical materialist tradition in that it founds a new practice of philosophy based on the axiomatic certainty that philosophy is a form of (class) struggle.

34. A former Lacanian analyst, Bryant, in *The Democracy of Objects*, likewise deploys Lacan's formulas of sexuation, aligning modern metaphysics with the masculine side of universality grounded in a transcendent exception (God or the subject who grounds/constitutes objective reality), while aligning his object-oriented onticology with the feminine side of non-all without exception (there is no transcendent exception, reality is composed of objects that are all on the same ontological level, and there is no way to totalize this multiverse of objects, since they are all withdrawn from each other with no overreaching object to totalize them). As we will discuss later in this introduction, the problem with such a move is that it fails to take into account the very transcendental position from which Bryant articulates such an onticology. If all objects are autopoietically constrained, is not Bryant's own description of a pluriverse of objects also constrained by the system-specific perspective proper to human objects?

35. Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpen-*



try of Things (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 130, 204. Worth noting here is that Gadamer advocated a similar inversion of Hegel's famous formula regarding the becoming-subject of substance, of the subjective-reflexive appropriation of all of our substantial presuppositions, attempting to perform the same journey backwards, from the subject to its substantial presuppositions.

36. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10.

37. Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, 121–22. As Johnston stresses, “subjects, although emerging from substance(s), come to be radically different from the ‘natural’ ontological grounds from which they arise and within which they operate.” Spinoza “offers nothing by way of an explanation for how and why substance becomes subject—that is to say, for how and why the wholistic totality of an organically homogenous substantial being shatters itself into a fragmented plethora of multiple attributes and modes, including those exceptional ensembles of attributes and modes through which substance achieves a self-reflective/reflexive consciousness of itself” (316).

38. For Harman on the withdrawn nature of objects, see his *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).

39. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 9.

40. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit: A Translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805–6)*, trans. Leo Rauch (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 87. As Johnston points out, Hegel's following critique of “false modesty” in the third volume of his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* could very easily be applied to the neovitalist attempt to overcome human hubris by decentering the subject: “People of this kind say: We are good for nothing, and because we are good for nothing, we are good for nothing, and wish to be good for nothing. But it is a very false idea of Christian humility and modesty to desire through one's abjectness to attain excellence; this confession of one's own nothingness is really inward pride and great self-conceit. But for the honour of true humility we must not remain in our misery, but raise ourselves above it by laying hold of the Divine.” Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, 312–13; Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 3: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 454–55.

41. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 19.

42. Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit*, 89.

43. We draw here on Lacan's claim in Seminar VI that the subject “encounters” itself “as a cut” and that this cut “shows us its form” in the *objet petit a*: “[T]he subject encounters himself as a cut or gap at the endpoint of his questioning. Moreover, it is essentially in the guise of a cut that [object] *a* shows us its form, in all its generality.” Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI: Desire and Its Interpretation, 1958–1959*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2019), 382.

44. “Impossible” here means that the *objet petit a* is the obverse of the subject; the two can never encounter each other in a direct opposition or mirror-

ing, but are instead like the two sides of the same spot on a Möbius strip. Hence Lacan's formulaic rendering of the relationship between the two as  $\$ \diamond a$  (the formula for fantasy), with the lozenge (*poinçon*) between them registering the following range of relations: "envelopment-development-conjunction-disjunction." See Lacan, *Écrits*, 542n17.

45. See Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 135, 140.

46. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York: Norton, 1997), 2.2.14–24.

47. For an extended discussion of this point, see Dolar, "Cogito as the Subject of the Unconscious."

48. Joan Copjec, e-mail correspondence with the authors; Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 24.

49. Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, trans. Ernest Newman (New York: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1914), 48. Newman translates Wagner's original German ("*die Wunde schließt die Wunde der Speer nur*") as follows: "the spear that smote must heal thee of thy wound."

50. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 118.

51. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 26. Harman makes much the same claim with regard to objects and relations: "Objects are not defined by their relations: instead, they are what enter into relations in the first place. Objects enter relations but withdraw from them as well; objects are built of components but exceed those components. Things exist, not in relations but in a strange sort of vacuum from which they only partly emerge into relation. Objects are purely actual, not potential. Yet this actuality is not defined by a set of relations with other things." Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 132.

52. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 114.

53. Lacan, in the following passage from Seminar XVIII, implicitly aligns his project with dialectical materialism: "If there is something I am, it is clear that I am not a nominalist. . . . If one is a nominalist, one has to renounce completely dialectical materialism, so that, all in all, I evidently reject the nominalist tradition which is effectively the only danger of idealism which can arise in a discourse like mine. The point is not to be a realist in the sense in which one was a realist in medieval times, in the sense of the realism of the universals; the point is to emphasize that our discourse, our scientific discourse, can only find the Real." Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant, 1971*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), 28; our translation.

54. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 122.

55. *Ibid.*, vii.

56. *Ibid.*, 117.

57. Little wonder, then, that the pluriverse envisioned by neovitalists re-

sembles the Middle-earth of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the defining work of fantasy literature.

58. F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutmann (Peru, Ill.: Open Court, 1992), 34. Gutmann translates Schelling's original German ("*der nie aufgehende rest*") as "the irreducible remainder."

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Part I

# Hegel and Philosophical Materialism



# What's the Matter?: On Matter and Related Matters

Mladen Dolar

Let me begin in a textbook manner. If we are to trust a German philosophical dictionary, with the proverbial German penchant for pedantic thoroughness, the first mention of materialism in a philosophical sense stems from Johann Georg Walch, a noted theologian from Jena, of all places—the same Jena where Hegel was to write the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and confront Napoleon on the white horse in 1806. In 1726, Walch published a *Philosophisches Lexicon* where, for the first time, he defined materialism as a philosophical position. The term seems to have already been around in relation to the sciences, physics in particular, but not in relation to philosophy. According to Walch, “one calls materialism the view where one denies all spiritual substances and admits no other substances but corporeal ones [*wenn man die geistlichen Substanzen leugnet und keine andere als körperliche zulassen will*]. . . . One usually calls materialism when all the properties and the functioning of natural bodies are deduced from the structure [*Beschaffenheit*] of matter, its size, shape, weight, mutual impact, and mixture, without recognizing any other spiritual principle, which amounts to what one otherwise calls mechanism.”<sup>1</sup> Walch refers here to a discussion in the natural sciences at the time regarding a major opposition between the so-called mechanists and the spiritualists, and extends this opposition to philosophy, where he singles out Hobbes and Spinoza as the philosophical counterparts of this mechanistic view, as materialists *avant la lettre*. Walch's use of “materialism” in this sense became canonized the moment he proposed it; his *Lexicon* was widely used and reprinted throughout the eighteenth century (the fourth edition is from 1775). The first French use of the word is from 1739, and the first English one from 1748.

The word instantly caught on and had a brilliant career throughout this century of enlightenment, during which time materialism became a password and a battle cry. In 1748, La Mettrie published *L'Homme machine*, reputedly the most mechanist and reductionist book ever written

(and, curiously, enthusiastically supported by none other than the Prussian king Frederick the Great, a liaison only imaginable in the heyday of the Enlightenment).<sup>2</sup> A century before, Descartes, in his *Meditations* (1641), envisaged the animal organism as a complicated machine, the human body as an automate (“what do I see from the window but hats and coats which may cover automatic machines?”),<sup>3</sup> but only to extol the difference between the human automaton of *res extensa*, on the one hand, and the thought, the soul, of *res cogitans*, on the other. A century later, La Mettrie scandalously treated the human soul, with all its thinking and spiritual capacities, as just as much an automaton as the body, nothing more: *l’homme-machine* equals *l’esprit-machine*. In 1759 Helvétius published *De l’esprit*, and, along similar lines, the book provoked a huge scandal and was publicly burned by the Paris hangman.<sup>4</sup> Above all, there was Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* (“the systematic dictionary of sciences, arts and crafts,” as the subtitle goes), a massive collective effort to spin out the materialist view into all areas of human knowledge and endeavor, and to give it an encyclopedic support—materialism conquering the world at large in all its facets.

Already from Walch’s lexicon entry we can deduce some basic properties of materialism that would shape the subsequent fiery debate surrounding it and largely frame the field of materialist inquiry up to this day. Let me list five of these essential interrelated features:

1. Mechanicism (or “mechanical materialism,” as this eighteenth-century stance is often labeled), which proposes a uniform mechanical causality to account for all phenomena, bodily and spiritual, without flinching. Following this principle, even if causality were to be refined, layered, and stratified to account for various regions of being, there would still, at bottom, be the idea of a single and unified web of natural causes without missing links, seamlessly intertwined between different levels, as if guided by a single hand. For Descartes, who philosophically introduced this notion of uniform mechanical causality, animals and machines were ultimately the same thing (hence the imagery of clockwork, so predominant at the time; it was Descartes who introduced the modern notion of a mechanical matter, that is, a matter which is not vibrant). After Descartes, materialism would remain haunted by the twin specters of machinality and animality, up to and including Deleuze’s desiring machines.

2. Determinism, according to which the uniform causes are seen to be univocally determining in all areas—hence the reason why materialism has always been suspected of depriving humans of freedom, of free will and action. Looking back at the ancient origins of materialism, one

can see that this is what already haunted its fate from the very beginning. The massive question of freedom was already raised with Epicurus and his notion of *clinamen*, the swerve, the departure from causality, the notion which Lucretius introduced both as a cosmological argument about the origin of the universe and, in the same breath, as a basis for the freedom of the will. It was a notion that never stopped producing scandal. Even in the most common current paperback edition of Epicurus's *The Art of Happiness*, the editor-translator says the following: "The doctrine of the swerve is a complete failure and a blot on ancient materialism. It is scientific nonsense and ethical folly."<sup>5</sup> Note the tone of moral indignation.

3. Monism, as opposed to any kind of dualism. According to this principle, there is but one single substance to body and mind; hence, God and transcendence have no place in this account: one can either reduce them to an abstract principle supervising and permeating the whole, or else, with Spinoza, maintain the equation of the two, "*Deus sive natura*." God, nature—same thing.

4. Reductionism, which follows from the above and was to accompany materialism as a constant reproach, seeing in it a stance that opposes and demotes any human exception and distinction (say, by spirit or immortal soul). Following this principle, the elevation of the human is seen as based in hubris, arrogance; dethroning the divinity went hand-in-hand with dethroning the human.

5. Finally, scientism, a close reliance on science, its current discoveries and its progress. Descartes, with his view of automata, *res extensa*, and the related *mathesis universalis*, belongs to the historic moment of the establishment of Galilean science, which was quickly to see enormous success—the biggest success story in human history—to be continued by physicalism, cognitivism, neuroscience, and so on, up to the present.

All these essential features usually associated with materialism were already there at the birth of the term; it is a modern term which then had to invent its own retroactive history, stretching back to the ancient atomism of Democritus and Epicurus, or even to the very beginning of philosophy, the first Greek naturalists, who strived for an immanent explanation of nature as opposed to mythos, demoting gods and mythology and relying on the natural sciences of the time. In this broad view, materialism has always already existed; it is as old as philosophy itself, and in this sense the entire history of philosophy could be seen as a struggle between two camps: materialism and idealism.

"Materialism" was a term of denigration to start with: however much he tried to write an impartial and objective dictionary entry for it, Walch



couldn't quite contain his rage. "This view displays in general an error or a false conception [*einen Irrtum oder falschen Begriff*] it entertains in relation to matter."<sup>6</sup> Thus, from the first moment on, materialism was placed on a battlefield that allowed for no neutral ground; it was never liable to a neutral description of a certain philosophical stance among others, an option that one could impartially consider. It was always a battle cry, a call to take sides, to gather under a banner. Once introduced, it carried with it the implication that philosophy is to be viewed as a field of irresolvable antagonism, of warfare, rather than a level-headed, reasonable debate in which interlocutors weigh the pros and cons of different options, each having equal rights to their claims. The moment one says "materialism," one always does more than apply a neutral, technical label to a certain position, classifying various types of approaches; the very way one proposes a classification or sets up a criterion is deeply imbued with the position one implicitly or explicitly takes. Materialism always puts into question the very principle of classification; one can't quite discuss it in a calm, sensible, equitable way among reasonable people of good will—and philosophers are anything but that (thank God!). The opposition between the two camps, materialism and idealism, is not symmetrical; there is no common framework from which to formulate the question. Say, what comes first, matter or idea? From which viewpoint can one ask this? How is the choice presented? This antagonism, however, is based on a missed encounter, for materialism and idealism are not two different answers to the same question, and if materialism is taken to be an alternative answer to the same philosophical preoccupations, then it is already doomed to be idealism. How to frame the frame itself?

After being introduced in the heyday of the Enlightenment, the term "materialism" would become ubiquitous over the next hundred years. Throughout the nineteenth century, a legion of natural scientists of different brands proudly assumed the mantle of materialism as concomitant with the scientific approach as such, the proper worldview that naturally follows from science. This even gave rise to the notorious *Materialismusstreit*, the "materialism controversy," which stirred a lot of passions in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century. On the other hand, the reaction against German Idealism in general and Hegel in particular gave rise to the new grounding of philosophical materialism, particularly through Feuerbach, whose follower was, for a time, Marx. Yet, as Marx was the first to realize, the proper grounding of materialism couldn't bypass Hegel, as it cannot bypass Hegel now.

## Hegel's Materialism

Let me approach the problem of materialism from the seemingly opposite side, that of the supposed arch-idealist, Hegel. When Hegel debated the issue of materialism, he always thought that the question of materialism was immaterial—not because he would discard matter in favor of idea, but because matter was for him just as much an idea as any other, and, as such, worthy of all respect. To take just a couple of quotes from the *Phenomenology*:

*Matter . . . is not an existent thing, but is being in the form of a universal, or in the form of a Notion. . . . When [Reason] interprets the moments of the law as “matters,” their essential nature has become for Reason a universal, and as such is expressed as a non-sensuous thing of sense, as an incorporeal and yet objective being.*<sup>7</sup>

What is seen, felt, tasted, is not *matter*, but colour, a stone, a salt, etc. Matter is rather a *pure abstraction*; and so what we are presented with here is the *pure essence of thought*.<sup>8</sup>

This is the gist of Hegel's argument: who has ever seen matter? What one sees are particular shapes, sizes, colors, and so on. One sees, hears, feels, tastes, and smells a multiplicity, a chaos of singularities; it takes a great feat of thought to say “all this is matter.” One has to bring this diversity and multiplicity under a single heading, a common denominator, to unify it, to conceptually grasp it as belonging to a single concept. Hence, for Hegel, matter is a *Gedankending*, a product of thought, of abstraction; it is a metaphysical idea with all its dignity. This is why, when debating ancient atomism in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, he praises the ancients' speculative insight that atoms introduce the principle of one as the principle of division. There he says, “*Das Eins kann man nicht sehen*,” “One cannot see one”:<sup>9</sup> atomism, as materialism, has nothing to do with the senses or the empirical—one could accordingly propose *Die Materie kann man nicht sehen*, “one cannot see matter.” What fascinates Hegel in matter is not its sensuous, corporeal materiality, but the infinite judgment which immediately equates the pure essence of thought with the objective being out there. So, firstly, all matter is for Hegel to be considered under the auspices of infinite judgment, on the model of “spirit is a bone” (and here one should remember that phrenology was initially a materialist venture, completely in line with the Enlightenment materialism of Franz Joseph Gall, Hegel's contemporary, and his followers).<sup>10</sup> And, secondly, matter is pure thought posited as externally existing, in the mode of ob-

jects; that is, it is thought existing independently of thought (if one is to follow Lenin's discriminating criterion for materialism as "matter independent of thought").<sup>11</sup> Pure thought contemplates itself as pure matter, and this is what thought should ultimately be in order to be worthy of its name—it should be able to espouse its otherness.

We should mark here the strange congruence of Hegel's formulation "non-sensuous sensuous being" (*ein unsinnliches Sinnliches*) with Marx's famous description of a commodity as a "sensuous supra-sensuous thing" (*sinnlich übersinnliches Ding*), the very quality that for Marx constitutes commodity fetishism.<sup>12</sup> This is the point at which the question of Marx's materialism should be addressed, both in its crucial accordance with and its crucial divergence from Hegel: on the one hand, the materiality of the supra-sensuous, the spectral materiality as presented in the world univocally ruled by the commodity form; on the other hand, an opening in view of an object which would not be a fetish and which could escape this univocity of the commodity form and its matter. For Hegel, the non-sensuous sensuous is the qualification of matter as the matter of thought; for Marx, the sensuous supra-sensuous is the qualification of matter under the conditions of the commodity form. Hence, for Marx, there should be a matter that would not be qualified by the supra-sensuous, ultimately free of "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."<sup>13</sup> But can one propose the concept of such a matter without falling back into the traps of traditional materialism?

For Hegel, matter is not a matter of the senses; it is an idea that forms a totality, an idea that totalizes reality by bringing it to the unity of a single principle, however much it wants to say "heterogeneity and diversity." But Hegel, the supposed big proponent of totality, is highly skeptical about this move. The problem is not that one proposes matter as the true substance rather than idea or spirit; the problem is that one doesn't thereby get out of the traditional framework of substantiality. For Hegel, it is not that matter is not the true substance, but rather that the very idea of substantiality is flawed. What is deeply wrong with it is not its materiality and sensual being, but the fact that matter is a proposal for an answer to the question of substantiality, and this is the question one should be rid of, or that should be radically recast. Hence, in Hegel's notorious formula, "substance is subject."<sup>14</sup>

So, is matter a substance, the true substance of what there is? "Substance," the master-word of philosophy, aims at six interrelated features: (1) In relation to time: to single out something which defies time and endures as the same through change, to grasp what resists fleetingness. (2) In relation to space: to grasp what lies beneath the surface, what literally stands under (*sub-stare*), to penetrate with thought to what lies behind

the deceptive surface. (3) To single out the necessary in opposition to the accidental; to purify substance from its superficial and contingent additions; to sieve, to divide, to sort out. (4) Substance stands for the essential as opposed to the appearance; appearance is prey to illusion, as is perception, hence substance is *ein Gedankending*; there is a certain assessment of human powers of cognition implied in this: perception as deceptive versus intellect, thought, reason that can grasp the essence. (5) Substance stands for universality, something universally valid and resistant to the vagaries of the particular and the singular; it is what is common to all as the very principle of universality. (6) Substance aims at the underlying unity versus multiplicity, a unitary principle, the one. This is what the oldest program of philosophy spelled out in three words, *hen kai pan*, “to grasp all as one.”

These traits are very rough, and I apologize for this massive and didactic simplification. They carry with them a wealth of ramifications, and they only indicate the general thrust of the idea of substantiality as the guideline of philosophy. If this is an accurate sense of what is typically understood as substance, then this defines precisely a substance which is not a subject. But if we are to seriously engage with the question of materialism, then we must take as its starting point the adage that “substance is subject.” Substance, in any way we conceive of it—matter, idea, spirit—must precisely lose its substantial hold, must pass into its other, lose itself as substance, whatever we take substance to be; it must be abandoned as the first principle. And if there is a single Hegelian word that one can take as a guideline for this process, that word would be *Sichanderswerden*, quite appropriately rendered as “self-othering.” For Hegel, any first principle is wrong merely by virtue of its being the first principle. To quote from the *Phenomenology*: “a so-called basic proposition or principle of philosophy, if true, is also false, just because it is *only* a principle.”<sup>15</sup> The refutation of the first principle is its deployment, that is, the something else it has to turn into in order to prove its validity, its passing into its other, and it has to pass into its other if it is what it purports to be.

So Hegel's main idea is to disrupt the traditional assumptions about substance that have largely held sway throughout the history of philosophy. Philosophy should disentangle itself from the model of substantiality, the ways of thinking conditioned by this paradigm. What is at stake is a shift of paradigm, a revolution in the ways of thinking, starting with the most elementary assumptions, the hidden presuppositions, about the very notion of substantiality. Asserting materialism is not enough to produce this shift; it is still easily caught in the tentacles of substance. Hence Hegel's insistence that matter is as much an entity produced by thought as is the idea. The task of any “true” materialism would thus be precisely

to propose a way to avoid this paradigm (and there are elements which have worked against this paradigm since the emergence of materialism with Democritus and Epicurus, with Lucretius, with the Stoics, and actually with all major philosophers the moment one starts to scrutinize them more closely) so that the dividing line runs within philosophies rather than between two neatly opposed camps. What would be a materialism worthy of its name that could stand the test of the Hegelian critique of substantiality—a materialism that wouldn't turn matter into a substance which is not a subject? This is the point where the question of Hegel's materialism should be raised.

With regard to all six traits of the prevailing notion of substance, Hegel ultimately maintains exactly the opposite: (1) What endures through time as permanent has to be dissolved, brought into movement; it has to pass into passing ("everything solid melts into thin air"). (2) What lies underneath has to come to the surface; all that is hidden must come to light. ("The power of Spirit is only as great as its expression, its depth only as deep as it dares to spread out and lose itself in its exposition.")<sup>16</sup> (3) Necessity must take the risk of passing into the contingent, must estrange itself in accidentality. (4) All essence must appear; the secret of essence must be divulged, must fully espouse appearance as its locus ("the suprasensuous is appearance qua appearance").<sup>17</sup> (5) What is universal must pass into the particular and the singular; this is the paramount mechanism of mediation, otherwise we are stuck with an abstract, empty universality. (6) One splits into two; any unitary principle is premised on a split.

One could say that the subject emerges where substance limps, *en ce qui cloche*, "in the loop of substance," as it were, precisely at the point of its non-totalizable nature. This is the paradox of the Hegelian totality: it presupposes and reflects its own impossibility; it is based on the cut that prevents it from simply closing upon itself. The inscription of the subject into substance is also something that prevents duality or dualism, say of the Cartesian *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, body and mind: thought is part of substance as its break (thought is the "break of being," *Unterbrechung des Seins*).<sup>18</sup> Subject is the name of the very impossibility of substance to be one, universal, necessary, eternal.

And this is where Hegel is furthest away from what Quentin Meillassoux has labeled "correlationism," the alleged cage of modernity from which we should escape.<sup>19</sup> Subject is inscribed as a rift and a torsion of substance, its *clinamen*, not in correlation to the object which would only exist as entrapped in this relation to the subject. Subject is rather the very impossibility of substance to be substance. If there is a "Hegelian materialism," if the reinvention of materialism has to pass through Hegel,

then the question of matter, of the object, has to be placed precisely in this rift, not as a substance that would function as a unifying explanatory principle, but as a rift of substantiality. And to make this abrupt short-circuit—one that the “Ljubljana School” famously stands for—this is where the *objet petit a*, the object of psychoanalysis, can take its Hegelian support, precisely as an excess which is not a correlate of the subject, but the subject’s inscription into the Real, the excess of the Real over the unified reality, over its seamless causality and its making sense.

### Freud’s Materialism

Hegel played no part whatsoever in Freud’s formation. The climate in which Freud was intellectually formed was entirely imbued with the scientific materialism of the late nineteenth century, often referred to, somewhat dismissively, as “scientism,” and very far from any Hegelian speculation. Freud famously spent what he called the happiest years of his life in Ernst Brücke’s laboratory, from 1876 to 1882, where he worked as a neurologist.<sup>20</sup> Freud was so enthusiastic about his intellectual father that he named one of his sons (Ernst) after him. Brücke was in close contact with Du Bois-Reymond and Hermann Helmholtz, as well as with the Berlin circle, the Deutsche Physikalische Gesellschaft, which issued a common materialist manifesto, maintaining above all the uniformity of causality as the crux. It appears that Freud was actually a formidable researcher in neurology who was well aware of the state-of-the-art research at the time, to the point that some of his findings can be seen to be on the track of the discovery of neurons (named and properly described by Wilhelm Waldeyer in 1891, after a number of scientists, including Freud, had paved the way).

In retrospect, this is an iconic moment, given the present debates between the neurosciences and psychoanalysis, and the elusive dividing line between the two. Freud, in 1882, was standing precisely at this crossroads between neuroscience and psychoanalysis, involving the question about the very nature of materiality and causality. This is a crucial moment for our discussion of materialism: can we say that Freud took a materialist path, a difficult and paradoxical materialist path, precisely as opposed to, yet nonetheless within, the kind of materialism in which he was raised? Psychoanalysis always had this question at its core, and one can recall here Freud’s constant anxiety in his early days: “haven’t I missed some organic cause for these spectacular hysteric symptoms?”<sup>21</sup> He never renounced the scientism in which he was intellectually formed;

his ambition was to extend it and make it more rigorous, so that it could include strange, “unobservable” entities such as the unconscious, the drives, and so on, which we can never see clearly or submit to experiment. One can put the alternative in these somewhat dramatic terms: an errant truth with no guarantee and no usual verification, as opposed to universal laws and causes, supported by the guarantee of the verifiable and the repeatable. Can this be seen as the materialist departure from science-based materialism, from naturalism, but nested in its very bosom, and not attempting to reach beyond it?

Freud was very fond of an adage that he got from his other intellectual father, Jean Martin Charcot, his master in psychiatric matters, with whom he spent his second formative period in Paris in 1885–86 (and after whom he named another of his sons): [*La théorie, c’est bon, mais*] *ça n’empêche pas d’exister* (“Theory is all right, but it doesn’t prevent something from existing”). So something exists in spite of theory, in spite of scientific explanation; it stubbornly insists in the face of the usual scientific account. Freud’s stance would thus be: do not give way as to what insists and repeats itself despite the received theories, be it so slight as slips of the tongue or so intrusive as traumas and symptoms. And what is the unconscious but something that insists without being quite covered by either facts or concepts? What is the death drive but a thrust of pure insistence which can never be quite pinned to facts?<sup>22</sup> How to make a science of what escapes science? What kind of universals can one construct on the basis of something that vanishes the moment it is produced—the cracks, the glitches, the quirks? One has to maintain the stance of science to get to it, but *encore un effort*, “one more effort,” is called for to extend the noble enterprise of Galilean science to such tiny cracks as presented by dreams, slips, and jokes, to fill in even the slightest missing links, to make it seamless and whole, to fulfill its mission. Can there be a Galilean science of this slight out-of-jointness?

This is the central paradox if one is to approach the question of materialism in psychoanalysis. Freud, departing from the framework of the neurosciences, never for a moment gave up on the scientific ideal that subtended them, the goal of a naturalist materialism that I have attempted to spell out in the five rough traits already encapsulated in Walch’s first definition. It is only by bringing this program to the extreme, to its outermost consequences, that the object of psychoanalysis appears as its inner edge, not as an unaccountable outer limit. This is so on all five counts:

1. Mechanicism: Within the question of uniform causality, the unconscious always appears as a crack, a leap, an effect without a cause, a

missing link. This is what is best captured by Lacan's adage "*il n'y a de cause que de ce qui cloche*": "the cause appears only in something that limps."<sup>23</sup> What the break of the causal chain brings to the fore is a cause as opposed to the regularity of the law. This is what accompanied the fate of materialism from the very beginning. This is why the question of *clinamen* produced such a scandal that went on for millennia, starting with Cicero's ranting that "for a physicist there is nothing more shameful [*nihil turpius*] than to say that something happens without a cause,"<sup>24</sup> up to Marx, who in his dissertation "On the Difference between the Democritean and the Epicurean Philosophy of Nature" was most tellingly the first one who tried to redeem the notion of *clinamen*. This is why Lacan tried to retrieve the three notions of *tyche*, *clinamen*, and *den* from ancient philosophy precisely as the points of departure from causality, its inner quirks, as concomitant with the very possibility of materialism.<sup>25</sup> Of course, Freud seems to be saying: if there is a crack in the manifest causality, then there must be a hidden, latent causality at work that we have to unearth in order to heal the crack, to reestablish the broken chain. If the unconscious is telling us something in a roundabout and crooked way, then the aim of interpretation would be to tell it directly and thus straighten out the roundabout. But this is a lure—one that Freud himself often fell prey to—for the unconscious consists only in this roundabout, in the surplus of *Enstellung*, "distortion": everything can be explained except for this detour, everything accounted for by filling in the crack with content, with the missing cause, except for the crack itself. The crack is the very condition of the unconscious and, thus, of the subject.

2. Determinism: Freud firmly believed that every contingent bit of psychic life was strictly determined, and his endeavor was to account for the tiniest, most trivial detail of a dream, a bungled action, a free association, and so on—to find a sufficient reason for the tiniest thing that seems to defy sufficient reason. But the unconscious has to do not with the way that some inscrutable causality, beyond the apparent causality, always determines us. The inscrutable, unconscious causality beyond the apparent causality is not in itself constituted as a separate domain; it only emerges in the break of the apparent causality and cannot be grasped independently as something that would supplement it and repair the crack. This is the wager of psychoanalysis: that by the slow process of working through, by the elaboration of the unconscious determinants through analysis, we can affect the causality at the point of its inconsistency, of its break. But one can get to this only through the firm pursuit of determinism; it emerges only as an edge within it, not beyond it.

3. Monism: The question is not the reduction to "one" that would account for the whole, which has in many ways held in check the history



of philosophy since Parmenides.<sup>26</sup> The question is rather how to conceive the Other, the Other of this “one,” without thereby espousing dualism. There are two contradictory tenets at the core of psychoanalysis that one could minimally spell out like this: first, there is the Other, the Other that animates all the entities that psychoanalysis has discovered (“the unconscious is the discourse of the Other,” “desire is the desire of the Other,” the Other as the Other sex [sexuality as alterity, the otherhood of sexuality as precisely beyond phallogentrism, which would be an account by One]); and second, the Other doesn’t exist, it has no ontological consistence, but it is thereby not nothing. Even by being “less than nothing” it persists, it keeps leaving traces, it nevertheless counts, although it doesn’t count for one. So this is not quite a monism or a dualism, but rather a monism of “one plus,” one plus something that hasn’t got the consistence of another one.

4. Reductionism: Notoriously, psychoanalysis has always been accused of reducing everything to sexuality as an alleged firm base from which one can scrutinize the seemingly more elevated realms of human endeavor. But sexuality is for Freud never a universal answer but a universal question; it always emerges in a deviation from natural causality, as a swerve, a *clinamen* of the natural needs (hence Freud’s theory of *Anlehnung*, the anacletic emergence of the sexual as “leaning on” the natural needs). This is not a reduction to the physiological; on the contrary, it is precisely a swerve away from the physiological. Freud tellingly starts his argument in the *Three Essays* by considering sexual aberrations, *Abirrungen*, and then proceeds to consider sexual *Abweichungen*, deviations regarding the sexual object and the sexual goal. For Freud, there is something in sexuality as such that is defined by *Abirrun*, by *Abweichung*—in one word, by a declination, a *clinamen* from the satisfaction of physiological needs. There is a deviation in the very concept of the drive which, to put it in a nutshell, cannot be grasped as independent of its deviation. There is the famous adage by Brecht: What is a bank robbery in comparison with the establishment of a bank? What are all these petty thieves in comparison to the systematic, legalized, and long-term robbery accomplished by banks? By analogy, one could say that Freud’s treatment of deviation and perversion in the *Three Essays* presents the following argument: What are all these perversions, deviations from the usual sexual object or goal, in comparison with sexuality as such, which is in itself nothing but a massive deviation, more spectacular than any perverse aberrations?

5. Scientism: But what kind of science? No doubt the Galilean science which shares the same subject with psychoanalysis. Yet, what would be the science that could include psychoanalysis? Can there be a

science of its object, this “less than nothing” which only emerges within the scientific pursuit? This is Lacan’s question. Freud sometimes argues that psychoanalysis is a provisional science, only needed as long as we are unable to arrive at a proper physiological and chemical explanation which would inscribe its object into the usual uniform causality; it is conditioned by our ignorance of the proper causes. Freud himself shied away from the idea that psychoanalysis’ provisionality is structural, that there can be a science of the missing link, without endeavoring to fill in its gap.

On all five counts, Freud eagerly espoused the program of materialism, even more enthusiastically than his fellow scientists; but this led him to an inner break, a quirk, a minimal difference within each of these counts. At the bottom of causality, determinism, monism, reductionism, and scientism, there is a crack that presents an opening. Is this the proper opening from which to conceive materialism? One can get to it only by persevering on these five counts, not by presenting another dimension, principle, or model, for this Other, precisely, doesn’t exist, has no separate existence apart from dwelling in the break. Freud’s is a materialism which takes its very fragile footing in the internal slippage of the traits that define it, showing fidelity to something that doesn’t quite exist, yet persists within them.

But the paradoxical materiality which is at stake here—doesn’t it imply a matter which is not quite a substance, a matter that doesn’t quite form a totality? Don’t we rejoin here, by way of a completely different and seemingly unrelated route, the core of Hegel’s adage “substance is subject”? Doesn’t Freud’s “inner departure” from scientific materialism pave the way for conceiving matter “not merely as a substance, but also as a subject”? If Hegel envisaged the subject as the inner twist of substance (its limping cause), then Freud gave another twist to this twist, the properly materialist twist, both extending and thereby shifting the Hegelian matrix.

### What’s the Matter?

The very rough history of materialism that I have drawn in sketchy outline above certainly appears dated. Materialism might have played its role as a subversive and critical stance, defying religion and traditional ways of thought; it might have inspired revolutionary changes and fought long battles with prejudice and superstition; but, no doubt,

materialism has historically largely won. It joined hands with the triumphant march of science and its progress, the technological advantages that permeate every aspect of our lives. It also joined hands with the other dictionary definition of materialism, apart from materialism as a philosophical theory or *weltanschauung*: namely, the practical and moral term of denigration that, according to some sources, goes back to Nathaniel Hawthorne, who in 1851 spoke of materialism as “a way of life based entirely on material goods,” pursuing only material ends, satisfied by material prosperity.<sup>27</sup> Hegel already maintained that what necessarily accompanies the materialist position in philosophy is “*Eigen-nutz und Nützlichkeit*,” “selfishness and usefulness” (which for him were not simply to be condemned, but presented an important speculative turn in the *Phenomenology* pertaining to the historical moment of the Enlightenment: namely, that the reduction of all objectivity to utility implies that the object is for the first time reduced to a mere being-for-the-subject, essential to our modernity). Hence the “materialist” general idea underlying capitalism, that material self-interest is the best way to form a social bond, community, and global society. Thus, on both counts, the epistemic-scientific and the practical, our era can be seen as profoundly materialist through and through, regardless of spiritual or religious squeamishness or revivals.

Indeed, materialism has won to the point that it arguably presents the ruling ideology of our times. This is the point of departure of Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds*, where in the manifesto-like opening he proposes “democratic materialism” as the simple diagnosis of the ruling doxa:

What do we all think, today? What do I think when I’m not monitoring myself? Or rather, what is our (my) natural belief? “Natural,” of course, in keeping with the rule of an inculcated nature. A belief is all the more natural to the extent that its imposition or inculcation is freely sought out—and serves our immediate designs. Today, natural belief is condensed in a single statement: *There are only bodies and languages*. This statement is the axiom of contemporary conviction. I propose to name this conviction *democratic materialism*.<sup>28</sup>

Democratic materialism would thus be not only the “spontaneously” and vastly accepted current worldview, but also the doxa largely underlying a vast number of philosophical endeavors. The label, rough as it is, nevertheless names something that really exists as the assumed framework of thought. “There are only bodies and languages.” If we take the two terms separately, then we can say that the doxa of traditional scientific materialism—naturalism (with some amendments up to cognitivism and

neuroscience)—was that “there are only bodies”: everything could be and should be explained from there; while the doxa of (post)structuralism (and postmodernity) was rather that “there are only languages”: everything is a text; there is nothing outside text, as the zeitgeist vulgate goes (to be sure, I am only dealing with the vulgate here, a caricature of a tendency, but which is nonetheless inveterate). Thus, the two move in the opposite direction: on the one hand, an attempt to reduce “culture” to “nature,” to explain “culture” from the material and physiological causality; on the other hand, an attempt to present a materialist theory of “culture” (“spirit is structured as a language”) with the tendency that it would thus envelop “nature” as its extension. It seems that we have reached the point of satiation of this (post)structuralist view; we are all ever so tired of this. This is where the doxa of the so-called new materialism is proposed: “we must get back to bodies, brains—neuroscience, objects, animals, the posthuman, a real which is not a sign.” Object-oriented ontology, vibrant matter, the great outdoors, outside of our discursive cage.<sup>29</sup> There is a seemingly common trait within the materialist tradition: namely, demoting the human, giving all power to the object, positing objects outside of our conceiving them, breaking out of the subject-object correlation (“democracy of objects,” the subject being an object in line with other objects),<sup>30</sup> leveling, neutralizing the traditional hierarchies. Yet, there are many dangers in this move that are overlooked with a surprising ease by its proponents, a few of which include: an unwitting spiritualization of matter, a quasi-magical ascription of our powers to the world out there without us; the false humility of the alleged self-effacement and debase-ment of the subject;<sup>31</sup> the sustaining of pure fantasy, which is the fantasy of a “world without us”; and the support of fantasy—as correlation—in something which is its supposed Outside.

This is a false debate, a false alternative: the moment one poses the question of precedence to be decided between corporeality (however plastically and vibrantly conceived) and the semiotic, the symbolic, something gets lost, the question of materialism gets obfuscated. If there is a real at stake in this duality, then it pertains to their intersection, their impossible interface, the infringement of the one upon the other. Bodies and languages don't coexist; the one cuts into the other, and the encounter of the symbolic and the body lies at the core of psychoanalysis. Its pursuit can be (ultimately, but not quite adequately) described as follows: the symbolic cuts into the body and derails it. (Hence the drives that Freud posits as the representatives of the somatic in the psychic, the interface of the two.) At the interstice of bodies and languages, their impossible interface, something is produced that is irreducible to either, and this is where the object of psychoanalysis, the *objet a*, emerges. Here

we can propose a tiny extension to the materialist doxa/dogma: there are only bodies and languages, except that there is the *objet a*. Badiou himself proposed a different counter-statement, “There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths,” and the combination of these two extensions points us in the direction of the truly materialist question: what is the connection between this slight, almost non-entity, this “less than nothing,” the *objet a*, and the universality of the truth-claim?

But this is still an insufficient way of putting it. The crucial point in all of this is that the two realms, bodies and language, don’t simply preexist their interface and overlap. We are never dealing with the problem of having a natural substratum that culture then comes to mold and restrict from the outside, but rather with their interface, an interface which comes first, as it were—a field of tensions and contradictions which precedes the neat division into nature and culture, bodies and languages. In other words, we don’t have two separate, independent and opposed areas, neatly localized and delimited, which come into conflict and cut into each other with an always unsatisfactory outcome, but rather a field of tensions and overlaps, an interface where inter precedes the two faces, and the neat opposition between bodies and languages, nature and culture, is precisely a way to avoid this paradox, to repress or circumvent it.

The history of psychoanalysis has always oscillated between the two poles of naturalization and culturalization. There was the strong tendency, already in Freud, to pin psychoanalysis to the sciences of nature, in the hope of finding the chemical and physiological grounding for what it describes. Nowadays this is what drives attempts to make psychoanalysis compatible with the cognitive sciences. On the other hand, psychoanalysis has largely made its career as a theory of culture in the humanities and social sciences, the areas where it is mostly taught in universities, Freud being mostly praised as a cultural hero in the zeitgeist. But there is something that gets lost in both of these receptions and accounts, a point where neither nature nor culture can be totalized and neatly opposed, where they both reach beyond themselves into their other, the blind spot of their opposition, where both nature and culture appear as not quite fully constituted, but rather as held together by their impossible overlap.<sup>32</sup> The Freudian move is to de-totalize the two, to undermine the self-evidence of their opposition, the result of which is a materialism that takes neither bodies nor languages as its support—nor matter, for that matter, however vibrant and plastic—but a “less than nothing” that animates their core.

## Notes

1. Johann Georg Walch, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 5, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Basel: Schwabe AG, 1980), §842; my translation.
2. Foucault commented on this link in his *Discipline and Punish*, drawing attention to the ambiguity of this materialism: on the one hand, rebellious and revolutionary, defying the church and horrifying the traditional morals; on the other hand, preparing anatomo-politics, the docile body of the new disciplines. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1975), 136.
3. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. Elizabeth Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2003), 77.
4. Derrida refers to this at the beginning of his own *De l'esprit*, a title calqued on Helvétius, evoking the connection between spirit and fire. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3.
5. George K. Strodach, introduction to *The Art of Happiness*, by Epicurus (New York: Penguin, 2012), 18.
6. Walch, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, §842.
7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 154.
8. *Ibid.*, 351.
9. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 1: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, trans. E. S. Haldane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 303. Haldane translates this line as follows: "The One can neither be seen nor shown with magnifying glasses or measures, because it is an abstraction of thought."
10. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 208.
11. "The existence of the thing reflected independent of the reflector (the independence of the external world from the mind) is a fundamental tenet of materialism." V. I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (Peking: Foreign Languages, 1972), 137.
12. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 154; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 165. Miller translates this line as follows: "a non-sensuous thing of sense"; Fowkes translates this line as follows: "sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible."
13. Marx, *Capital*, 163.
14. "Everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 10.
15. *Ibid.*, 13.
16. *Ibid.*, 6.
17. *Ibid.*, 89.
18. "That interruption, which we regard . . . as the other side to atoms, or as

vacuum, is the principle of movement: for the movement of thought is also like this and has interruptions. Thought in man is the very same as atoms and vacuum are in things, namely their inward essence.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 2: Plato and the Platonists*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 290.

19. For Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism, see his *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008).

20. Anecdotaly, Brücke was born in Berlin in 1819, just at the moment when Hegel got there to assume his professorial position, thus making Brücke the literal, unwitting “bridge” between Hegel and Freud.

21. See, for instance, Freud’s commentary on his dream of Irma’s injection, in which he responds to the persistence of Irma’s hysterical symptoms by thinking to himself, “*after all I must be missing some organic trouble.*” Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1955), 132.

22. “The theory of the drives is so to say our mythology. Drives are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness. In our work we cannot disregard them, yet we are never sure that we are seeing them clearly.” Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 22 (London: Hogarth, 1964), 95; I have substituted “drives” for “instincts.”

23. “In short, there is a cause only in something that doesn’t work.” Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 22.

24. Quoted in Ernst A. Schmidt, *Clinamen* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 53; my translation.

25. For further elaboration on this point, see Mladen Dolar, “Tyche, clinamen, den,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, no. 2 (2013): 223–39.

26. Compare Nietzsche: “an article of metaphysical faith, stemming from a mystical intuition and which we come across in all philosophies, with the always new attempts to express it better—the affirmation that ‘all is one.’” Quoted in Heinz Wismann, *Les Avatars du vide* (Paris: Hermann, 2010), 80; my translation.

27. See dictionary.com, entry “materialism.”

28. Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009), 1.

29. Catherine Malabou, as both a Hegelian and a neuro-person, is a symptomatic name in this, the embodiment of this slide from one paradigm to the supposedly new one, a living contradiction—or can contradiction be reconciled through plasticity?

30. See Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities, 2011).

31. See Hegel’s caveat about humility, human hubris, preaching humility in the face of matter, objects, and so on. There is always the hubris of humility, the conceit of being nothing, of reveling in how great I am in making myself so

small, so humble in front of the object and matter. For Hegel, by contrast, the true humility is to reach for the absolute: "It is a very false idea of Christian humility and modesty to desire through one's abjectness to attain to excellence; this confession of one's own nothingness is really inward pride and great self-conceit. But for the honour of true humility we must not remain in our misery, but raise ourselves above it by laying hold of the Divine." G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 3: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 454–55. I owe this reference to Adrian Johnston.

32. I must refer here to Alenka Zupančič's magisterial development of this point in her *What IS Sex?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017).



# Subjectivity in Times of (New) Materialisms: Hegel and Conceptualization

Borna Radnik

In general the whole progression in philosophizing (insofar as it is a methodical, i.e., a *necessary* progression) is nothing other than merely the *positing* of what is already contained in a concept.

—G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §88

The inextricability of being and thinking is something which has been recently criticized by Quentin Meillassoux. In his now infamous *After Finitude*, Meillassoux puts forward the concept of correlationism, which refers to any philosophical orientation that insists on the inescapable nature of the correlate of thought and being.<sup>1</sup> Correlationism maintains that the intertwinement of what is and the activity of thought is unavoidable. For the correlationist thinker, we do not have access to the realm of things as they exist independently of our experience and cognition of them (i.e., the Kantian thing-in-itself); we only ever have access to being insofar as being accords with, or is reducible to, thought. In this respect, contemporary philosophy, to the extent that it upholds the Kantian model, has “lost the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers.”<sup>2</sup> To challenge the correlationist tendency that has ostensibly plagued continental philosophy since the publication of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Meillassoux evokes the “arche-fossil,” a term which refers to ancient material objects whose existence predates not only the emergence of human beings as a species, but also givenness as such. Meillassoux’s arche-fossil is a “*givenness of a being anterior to givenness*.”<sup>3</sup> According to Meillassoux, the arche-

fossil poses a problem for correlationism because it necessarily forces us to think outside the confines and limitations of human subjectivity. In this respect, Meillassoux's speculative materialism, insofar as it attempts to go beyond any conceptual mediation through subjectivity when accessing being *qua* being, is a philosophy that decenters the category of the subject and, with it, subjective experience.

However enticing Meillassoux's speculative materialism may be, as thinking subjects our activing of thinking necessarily involves conceptual determinations. Much to his chagrin, Meillassoux's philosophy relies on conceptual determinations that find their intelligibility in the activity of thought. Terms such as "givenness," "arche-fossil," "relationality," "subject," "object," and "outside" are all, at their base, concepts or thought-determinations that refer to various things, ideas, events, and moments. Even "being" and "thinking" are conceptual categories whose comprehension is grasped by thinking, but a thinking that thinks itself. There is a self-reflexivity at work that Meillassoux does not seem to explicitly acknowledge when he endeavors to separate the correlate of thought and being. The dialectical contradiction here is that the very attempt to separate thought and being in order to "go beyond" or "get outside" of the subject engenders a dialectical process that necessarily involves conceptual determinations that are only intelligible to us as thinking subjects. In other words, there is no metalanguage: insofar as we remain human subjects, there is no outside position from which to think the other-than-human because our conceptualization of *what is* and of *what is other* in relation to us necessarily recoils back upon the activity of thought. Our quest to think the other-than-(human)-thought necessarily involves human thinking.

The insistence on this self-reflexivity is what G. W. F. Hegel has in mind when he asserts that "every philosophy is essentially idealism or at least has idealism for its principle, and the question then is only how far this principle is carried out. . . . The opposition between idealistic and realistic philosophy is therefore without meaning."<sup>4</sup> Hegel's point is that all thinking is nothing but conceptualization—moreover, idealism—insofar as it grasps conceptual determinations. To this extent, conceptualization is the primordial ground of all philosophy. The opposition between idealism and realism (and, for our purposes, materialism) is meaningless precisely because idealism, as absolute (i.e., nonrelative), traces the conceptual movement that is immanent to thought and being. Realist philosophy is predicated on concepts such as "matter," "atoms," and so on, and these are conceptual idealizations that are *posited* in the activity of thought. For Hegel, however, these idealizations are representations (*Vorstellung*) or "picture-thoughts" that exist as imaginary constructs

within the subject. An idealism that remains fixed within the confines of representations is a decidedly *subjective* idealism, one perhaps best exemplified by Kant's transcendental idealism, wherein the objects of our experience are mere phenomena that are cognized and made intelligible by a priori, transcendental categories of the faculty of the Understanding. Subjective idealism only concerns the *form* of our representations and remains indifferent to their content. This indifference to content renders subjective idealism deficient, incomplete, and one-sided.<sup>5</sup> Conceptual determinations do not condition our thoughts, but are constitutive of what the act of thinking is in both its content and form. Whenever we think, conceptual determinations are inherent in *what* and *how* we think. What we think, for Hegel, recoils back upon the activity of thought itself. The movement of "turning back" inherent in the act of thinking is what Hegel calls "*absoluter Gegenstoß*," which translates into "an *absolute* internal *counter-repelling*."<sup>6</sup> For Hegel, this absolute counter-repelling/recoil is an operative process internal to thought, a movement that turns back onto itself by positing the conceptual presuppositions that make what is posited possible in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

However, if we are to avoid a relapse into subjective idealism, then a properly consistent materialism cannot remain silent about its implicit idealist foundation. Materialism's reliance on conceptual determination can no longer stay secret, but must be openly and proudly declared. This declaration, however, does not entail a reduction of the objective world to mere concepts that are subsumed within the subjective mind; the acknowledgment of the constitutive role played by the conceptual determinations inherent in thought and being does not preclude materialism, provided that the type of materialism we subscribe to is dialectical in its logic. As Frank Ruda correctly points out, the "split that separated idealism from materialism, a split that leads right into the heart of all debates about the role and stance philosophical thought takes in view of a world to which it seeks to be contemporary, this very split after the disappearance of idealism reappears within materialism."<sup>8</sup> This split in materialism is how Ruda reads the distinction that Alain Badiou draws between democratic materialism and materialist dialectics in his *Logics of Worlds*.<sup>9</sup> Ruda reads the difference between the materialist dialectic and democratic materialism as a difference of admitting the idea at work within materialism itself. According to Ruda, whereas democratic materialism is a "materialism without an idea," a "materialism without idealism," the materialist dialectic is "an idealism without idealism."<sup>10</sup> As a Hegelian, Ruda is of course well aware that the implicit presupposition haunting his proposed interpretation of Badiou's materialist dialectics is that any conception of materialist dialectics necessarily recognizes its constitutive idealist kernel.

Echoing Ruda, Slavoj Žižek sums up the dialectically interwoven nature of idealism and materialism when he asserts that “what characterizes dialectical materialism is precisely that it incorporates the idealist legacy. . . . It is a *materialism with an Idea*, an assertion of the eternal Idea outside the space of idealism.”<sup>11</sup> For his part, Žižek interprets dialectical materialism’s internalization of the Idea in terms of the (self)-movement of Hegel’s absolute recoil. Žižek insists that the very attempt at thinking that which is external to Hegelian dialectics engenders a retroactive (as opposed to retrospective) movement wherein what is other to the dialectical movement (i.e., what is posited as external to the thinking subject) is nothing but a turning back onto the movement of the subject’s activity of thinking. According to Žižek’s Lacanian reading of Hegel’s dialectical process, “in fighting its external opposite, the blind non-sublatable repetition, the dialectical movement is fighting its own abyssal ground, its own core; in other words, the ultimate gesture of reconciliation is to recognize in this threatening excess of negativity the core of the subject itself.”<sup>12</sup> However, the “threatening excess of negativity” that inheres within the core of the subject does not originate in the subject. Žižek maintains that while the dialectical process that generates the Hegelian subject (i.e., subjectivization) emerges from substance, substance itself is contingent upon conceptual presuppositions that are only rendered consistent through a retroactive positing by the subject. To this extent, Žižek argues that there is a “radical lack of any firm foundational point” in the dialectical relation between subjectivity and substantiality.<sup>13</sup> Like Ruda, then, Žižek employs Hegel’s insight that there is an implicit universal philosophical presupposition essential to any philosophy whatsoever: namely, its reliance on concepts and the process of conceptualization.

Following Ruda and Žižek, in this chapter I argue that the dialectical, infinite-activity of becoming that constitutes the absolute Idea engenders a materialism that avoids self-reflexive contradiction by virtue of its unification of the concept (subject) with objectivity (substance).<sup>14</sup> This is the case, I claim, for three central reasons. First, a brief examination of the “positing the presupposition” thesis in Hegel’s Doctrine of the Concept confirms that conceptualization is always already present in the activity of thinking. Second, the fact that the universality of the concept (*Begriff*) emerges through particularity is what guarantees the inseparability of ontology and logic, or being and thinking. Third, the thought of the absolute Idea necessarily moves us toward the transformative activity that is inherent in materialism as a practical activity. To demonstrate this last point, I look at Marx’s championing of the Idea’s dynamic activity in his “Theses on Feuerbach.” As an infinite, dynamic, dialectical movement, the absolute Idea is a transformative activity, an immanent dialectic, the movement of subject to substance, and substance

to subject. It is this immanent dialectic that determines materialism's subjective and substantial practical activity. The equality between subject and substance is the definitive aspect of the Idea. Dialectical materialism is not a regression into a realm of ideals—or, perhaps more provocatively, a subject-oriented ontology—where reality is somehow entirely dependent on subjective ways of knowing. Rather, the Hegelian absolute Idea acknowledges the self-reflexive aspect of conceptual determination; it internalizes conceptual determination as its content unites it with objectivity (i.e., being and essence).

To begin with the Hegelian “positing the presupposition,” this thesis finds its conceptual iteration in the Doctrine of the Concept section of the *Science of Logic*. Conceptual determination is retroactively engendered as the logically necessary presupposition that is immanent to both thought and being. However, before we can unpack and examine the dialectic between the act of positing and the negative determination of conceptual presuppositions, we need to first make sense of the identity between thinking and conceiving.

In a letter to Friedrich Immanuel Neithammer dated October 10, 1811, Hegel asserts that conceptualization is anything but a mere means of thinking. The very notion that concepts are tools that we employ in the act of thinking is preposterous; it is analogous, Hegel writes, to claiming that “chewing and swallowing food were a mere means of eating . . . as if the understanding still did much else besides thinking.”<sup>15</sup> Hegel's complaint is that concepts are not instruments that are deployed at our leisure in the process of thinking, but rather that conceptualization is constitutive of the very act of thinking as such. The activity of thought, insofar as it is a process, is a process of conceiving.<sup>16</sup> Against the standard philosophical treatment of concepts as formal categories, Hegel maintains that, far from being empty, dead forms, concepts possess a determinate content. There is no difference between the seemingly rigid opposition of form and content. Conceiving and thinking are identical for Hegel, or, rather, they are the selfsame movement wherein the concept as infinite form embodies any and all content.<sup>17</sup> There is an immanent inescapability to conceiving: whenever we think, we implicitly posit conceptual determinations that determine the structure and content of what we think. We think in and through concepts, regardless of the topic at hand. Immanent to thought are conceptual determinations; this is what Hegel means when he claims that we posit the conceptual presuppositions whenever we think.

A crucial compound of *Setzen* (to posit) is *voraussetzen*, which means not only to “presuppose, require, [or] assume (a thing or proposition),” but, more literally, “to posit beforehand, in advance.”<sup>18</sup> To posit, then,

is always already to constitute a negative, conceptual determination as a presupposition. Take the example of the law of cause and effect. Physically, the cause posits its effect. Conceptually, however, it is the effect that posits its cause as a presupposition that immanently determines the effect itself. The conceptual determination (e.g., the cause) is identified retroactively through the content of the effect. Conceptual determination is reflective in the sense that it turns, or recoils, back onto itself.<sup>19</sup> When we think of anything whatever, we posit conceptual determinations that construct the very form and content of what we think. To take a very stupid example, when I think of my cat, I very well have a specific, particular animal in mind (i.e., not Felix the Cat, or Garfield, or any other feline, but distinctively *my* cat). Yet the thought “my cat” not only relies on the universal concept of “cat” and “possession” (mine-ness), but these concepts determine the very content, and composition, of the thought “my cat.” The universality of the concept of “cat” emerges through its other, that is, through the particular experience of *a* cat. When I posit or assert a thought, I simultaneously presuppose the concepts necessary for me to generate this thought and render it intelligible. The concept, then, is universality as such and not *a* universal. The concept has universality as one of its three moments (along with particularity and singularity). The relation between the object as particular and the concept as concrete universal is a negative determination. In expressing a particular (e.g., *this* cat) we simultaneously express a universal.<sup>20</sup> These conceptual determinations, as presuppositions, operate as negative determinations that structure and shape the very being of our thought. It is this self-reflexive nature of the activity of thinking which the absolute Idea internalizes and at the same time exposes: to think is to conceive. The concept is self-explanatory—that is to say, what is explained (*explanadum*) and the explanation (*explanans*) are identical. By explicating any-thought-whatsoever, the concept explicates itself by virtue of the employment of concepts in the activity of thinking—though, rather than simply having discursive import, the logic of the concept is ontologically constitutive of reality.

Indeed, while Hegel’s speculative philosophy is “the science of *things* captured in *thoughts*,” it is a mistake to interpret this as claiming that the world outside the subject is somehow dependent on the subject’s mind.<sup>21</sup> The concept “cannot be made up of determinations and relationships which are alien and external to those things. Thinking things over . . . directs us to the universal in things, but the universal is itself one of the moments of the concept.”<sup>22</sup> Thinking about external objects eventually leads us to discover the internal conceptual determination that exists in objects themselves. Thought “directs” us to universal concepts that are immanent to particular objects. Concrete universality arises out

of particularity. It is only through encountering and thinking about my cat as a particular empirical animal that the concrete universal concept of “cat” emerges.

However, universality is just one of three moments of the logic of the concept itself. Not only are there determinate concepts—that is, concepts *about* this or that matter (e.g., the concept of “cat” is a universal concept insofar as it includes within itself all particular species of cats)—but there is also the concept of the concept, that is, the pure concept itself as the concrete universal that includes within it any-concept-whatsoever as its particular instantiation. As Hegel makes clear, then, conceptual determinations are just as much ontological determinations as they are thought-determinations. Hegel maintains that the external, real world abides by the same rational structure that determines thoughts. This is in contrast to what, for Hegel, passes for subjective idealism, wherein the nature of reality itself is not entirely dependent upon a knowing subject. Hegel characterizes Fichte’s philosophy—perhaps uncharitably—as a form of subjective idealism. Whether or not Hegel’s representation of Fichte is absolutely accurate remains open to debate. However, it is worth remembering that Fichte conceives of the self-positing activity of the “I” or Ego as not only the fundamental ground of all thought, but also as an activity that establishes the category of being in its dynamism. The Act of the self-positing “I” forms the activity of thought and being; however, it is an activity that is entirely grounded *within* the self-positing subject. External reality, in Fichtean terms, remains dependent on—and conditioned by—the self.<sup>23</sup> One of Hegel’s chief criticisms of Fichte’s philosophy is its one-sidedness, the fact that it grounds reality solely on the subject’s self-activity. Fichte’s notion of the self, in Hegel’s view, is hindered by its own finitude. Fichte’s subject engages in a self-positing activity whereby concepts determine the activity of thought as well as reality; however, these concepts are not constitutive of reality itself. The objective world’s existence is entirely conditioned (and therefore caused) by the Fichtean Ego.<sup>24</sup> Hegel’s central aim is to avoid this one-sidedness, and so he conceives of an ontological thesis whereby the nature of reality itself is neither mind-dependent nor mind-independent, but both mind and reality have the same ontological structure.

Hegel’s absolute idealism is not antirealist in the sense that it denies the otherness of thought (i.e., the objects of thought) ontological status. Rather, the process of conceiving integrates this otherness into itself, but this integration is a determination that is constitutive of reality as opposed to a determination which we as thinking subjects simply “project onto” reality. While it is certainly true that, as thinking subjects, we have concepts in the sense that we engage in the activity of conceiving,

what we are ontologically also corresponds with the dialectical structure of absolute negative universality, or the “I.” As a self-referring and self-determining unity, the “I” is a universal by way of its negative relationality to its other. On the one hand, the “I” has the structure of the pure concept itself as a self-referring unity by abstracting itself from all determinate content. The “I,” as the pure concept, is only equal to itself and hence determines itself rather than being dependent on an other for its determination. On the other hand, the “I,” in its self-referring negativity, is “*singularity, absolute determinateness* that stands opposed to anything other and excludes it—*individual personality*.”<sup>25</sup> Hegel of course rejects the Kantian thesis that the concepts or categories of thought are a priori transcendental forms of thinking which condition the possibility of empirical experience. Kant’s transcendental idealism maintains that the twelve transcendental categories of the Understanding are entirely bound up within the rational, finite subject and are therefore not ontologically derived from things-in-themselves. To this extent, Kant’s account of conceptualization remains intersubjective in the sense that the categories of the Understanding are limited to our experience of phenomenal objects and so cannot be said to be ontologically constitutive of a reality that is not relative to us as knowing subjects.

In Hegel’s view, Kant turns conceptualization into an abstract formal process whereby the determinate, immanent content of particular objects is dismissed in favor of empty, abstract universal concepts (e.g., necessity and contingency as forms whose content is “filled in” by empirical phenomena that correspond to it). Hegel’s reproach to Kant is that there is no account of truth in the activity of conceiving on the Kantian model. Kant’s account of conceptualization is the activity of the Understanding, but this activity remains a fixed, rigid structure. Conceptualization becomes nothing more than a *narration* without truth wherein the representational or pictorial (*Vorstellung*) form of thought merely describes experience by extracting and abstracting universal concepts from particular instantiations.<sup>26</sup> Philosophy, if it is to be a proper speculative science, cannot be content with this because it shackles the active dynamic of conceptualization to thoughts alone without recognizing the same dynamic structure within the real. If, as Kant maintains, the categories of the Understanding have no ontological status beyond their conditioning role of the unconditioned, that is to say, beyond their transcendental role within the finite rational subject, then Kant’s transcendental idealism remains a one-sided enterprise because of its self-imposed limitations. Hegel’s speculative philosophy seeks to explode the fixity of the Understanding by engendering the immanent contradictions that lie dormant within Kant’s philosophical edifice. Exalting the fac-



ulty of Reason over and against that of the Understanding, Hegel asserts that "reason's battle consists in overcoming what the understanding has rendered rigid."<sup>27</sup> This goes for Kant's differentiation between appearances and things-in-themselves. Hegel dialectically integrates the Kantian narrative approach to philosophy with the necessity of the comprehension of truth *in* the narrative as such: "Philosophy ought not to be a narrative of what happens, but a cognition of what is *true* in what happens, in order further to comprehend on the basis of this truth what in the narrative appears as a mere happening."<sup>28</sup> It is the immanent emergence of truth from semblance that characterizes Hegel's criticism of the Kantian thing-in-itself. We ought to remember that for Kant the objective world, while certainly real (as opposed to illusory), is necessarily conditioned by the a priori transcendental categories of the Understanding as well as the pure (a priori) intuitions of space and time.<sup>29</sup> The thing-in-itself can be thought, but it cannot be said to be *known* in the same way that we cognize and comprehend empirical objects of our experience. Kant's noumena plays a purely negative, operative role as a "boundary concept" which reinforces the limitations of what can be known.<sup>30</sup> The Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena is predicated upon a fixed division that is upheld and maintained by the Understanding, but this division dissolves.<sup>31</sup> The distinction between the world of appearances and the world of the supersensible (the thing-in-itself) collapses under the weight of its own internal contradictions.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike Fichte's self-positing Ego and Kant's transcendental "I," Hegel's logic of the concept is not merely an act of thinking immanent to the finite subject, but is constitutive of being as well. Both thought and reality have the same dialectically dynamic structure and genesis. Being and thought are always already intertwined insofar as they enjoy the same immanent determinations for their content.<sup>33</sup> For Hegel, the objectively real (as opposed to appearances of things-in-themselves that exist for us) has its truth if and only if it is ontologically identical with the concept.<sup>34</sup> Conceptual determination is not only the underlying presupposition inherent in the activity of thinking (when and what thought posits), but is at the same time the ontological generative and structural presupposition in reality itself. The pure concept as the self-determining and self-referring "I" is subjective and therefore cannot recognize its selfsame dialectical movement as an activity that constitutes objectivity. The adequate concept that has its form in the objective as well as the subjective is the absolute Idea. It is within the absolute Idea that "the concept attains the realization absolutely adequate to it, and is free inasmuch as in this real world, in its objectivity, it recognizes its subjectivity, and in this subjectivity recognizes that objective world."<sup>35</sup> The comprehension and recognition

of the unity of being and thinking with respect to their conceptual determinations is what constitutes the absolute Idea, for the Idea not only avows the self-reflexivity of conceptualization inherent in thought (as subjective), but also unifies this activity with reality (as objective).

The absolute Idea is an infinite form that has the dialectical movement of the concept for its content.<sup>36</sup> The absolute Idea has revealed itself to be the exposition of conceptual determinations as it figures in the entire movement of logical and ontological activity. Having the conceptual infinite form for its content, the absolute Idea not only traces the dialectical movement immanent to thought, but this infinite form “emerges from the fabric of reality itself *as it progresses or returns to the universal*.”<sup>37</sup> The Idea, as something that we can think, integrates the subjective concept with the objectively real. The absolute Idea is equally both substance and subject because it mutually integrates subject (or concept) into substance, and substance into subject.<sup>38</sup> Hegel’s absolute Idea is, as Béatrice Longuenesse points out, “the agreement between the act of thinking and what it purports to think; the agreement of the concept and its object.” This agreement, however, comes about through the very conceptual, dialectical movement that precedes the absolute Idea and makes up the unfolding of the concept that Hegel traces in his speculative logic. It is in this “movement of the subject, the unity of the ‘I think’ as constitutive of its object, that the Absolute is constituted as agreement of the subject and the object.”<sup>39</sup> Hegel’s absolute Idea contains within itself all conceptual determinations and recognizes thought’s act of conceiving. The absolute Idea is absolute (i.e., nonrelative) because it emerges as the supreme result of all conceptual determinations. There is nothing else left for the absolute Idea to think because any and all thought-determinations have come before it. As Marx says, the absolute idea is bored because thought has exhausted its logical content.<sup>40</sup> In this respect, the absolute Idea avoids falling into a performative contradiction because its self-reflexive dynamic explicitly acknowledges the conceptual determinations inherent in the activity of thought as well as being. But, as we have seen, Hegel’s “I” does not simply refer to a finite thinking subject. Longuenesse articulates this when she writes that “if Hegel . . . profoundly transforms the notion of the Absolute, he also transforms that of the subject. ‘I think’ is not the thought of a finite subject. It expresses the unity of a process that has its own necessity over and above the particular individual circumstances of empirical subjects.”<sup>41</sup>

Gillian Rose expresses the practical and transformative dynamic of Hegel’s absolute Idea when she asserts that “thinking the absolute means recognizing actuality as *determinants* of our acting by recognizing it in our acts. Thus, recognizing our transformative or productive activity has a

special claim as a mode of acknowledging actuality which transcends the dichotomies between theoretical and practical reason, between positing and posited. Transformative activity acknowledges actuality in the act and does not oppose act to non-act.”<sup>42</sup> Hegel’s absolute Idea, as a transformative, dialectical activity, constitutes a praxis that is as much material as it is ideal because it openly recognizes its inherent conceptual presuppositions. It is the active dynamism of dialectics that Marx inherited from the Hegelian system, and it is Hegel’s absolute Idea that informs Marx’s dialectical materialism—a materialism with the Idea—and sets Marx apart from other materialists.<sup>43</sup>

Marx’s brand of materialism is dialectical because it integrates the dynamic activity of Hegel’s absolute Idea within itself, understood as the unity of the concept with reality. Rather than posit that the foundational basis of reality is “matter” (i.e., a universal idealization, as we saw above), Marx strives to shift the emphasis from merely contemplating materialism to practicing it as a human activity. For Marx, all previous forms of materialism suffer from the same malady: they all conceive of material, external reality as abstractions, as objects of contemplative thought.<sup>44</sup> Marx stresses the importance of a materialism predicated on human *activity* rather than on reflective thought. This is apparent from Marx’s complaint that “Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from conceptual objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity. . . . Hence he does not grasp the significance of ‘revolutionary,’ of practical-critical, activity.”<sup>45</sup> In true Hegelian fashion, Marx emphasizes that the objective truth of reality itself is not something that can be proven in thought, but is something that can be proven practically by human activity.<sup>46</sup> Hegel’s absolute Idea, as we have seen, transforms and transcends the theoretical/practical divide by integrating them both into a single and same thought. Dialectical materialism, as a materialism with the Idea, acknowledges this transcendence. As Marx says in Thesis 8: “Social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in *human practice and in the comprehension of this practice*.”<sup>47</sup> Marx does not merely claim here that the rational solution to social life lies in human practice and practice alone, but rather that it lies in practice and the comprehension of this practice. The comprehension of human practice, of theory *and* practice, is the absolute Idea as the unity of conceptual determination and objectivity, or the unity of subject and substance, or again, the unity of thinking and being.<sup>48</sup> We find the same dialectical unity of theory and practice when Marx asserts that “the *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*. Philosophy cannot be made a reality without the sublation

[*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat, the proletariat cannot be abolished without philosophy being made a reality.”<sup>49</sup>

Unlike Meillassoux’s speculative materialism, which seeks to go beyond the subject only to generate performative contradictions due to neglecting the idealist center inherent in its activity of positing, dialectical materialism, as a materialism with the Idea, not only openly proclaims its foundational Hegelian idealism, but also goes “beyond” the finite subject by integrating subjectivity into its doctrine. The absolute Idea, as the equality of substance and subject, constitutes being and thinking into a single totality. Žižek is therefore correct when he points out that the immanent antagonisms and tensions operative in reality are tensions in the conceptual determinations themselves, but that these conceptual determinations are not reducible to either substance or subject, but comprise and constitute both:

For a materialism which has absorbed the lesson of Hegel, “reality out there” (the real-in-itself) really is “dematerialized,” an “abstract” interplay of purely formal interrelations in which “matter (in its thickness) disappears.” Far from indicating a radical externality resisting the subject, the thickness of objectivity resisting the subject’s grasp is precisely the subjective moment, the most elementary “reifying” illusion of subjectivity, what the subject adds to the real-in-itself. This brings us to another key lesson of Hegel: whenever we are dealing with the tension between our (subjective) notional determinations and the stuff “out there” which resists our grasp, this tension is by definition secondary, an effect or reifying (mis)perception of what is originally an inner imbalance or antagonism in the texture of notions themselves. Therein lies Hegel’s basic “idealist” wager: every tension between notional determinations and reality can be reduced to an immanent tension of notional determinations. So where is the “materialism” here? In the fact that these tensions or antagonisms are constitutive and irreducible, that we can never arrive at a “pure” and fully actualized notional structure.<sup>50</sup>

In the final analysis, dialectical materialism as a materialism with the Idea encompasses the subject-substance doctrine within itself.<sup>51</sup> The absolute Idea’s subjective aspect allows dialectical materialism to recognize the conceptual determinations inherent in its dynamic activity. The Idea’s substantial aspect allows it to recognize the conceptual determinations internal to reality itself. The Hegelian lesson of the subject turns out to be that the subject is not just a subject, but is also, equally and always already, substance.

## Notes

1. Meillassoux writes that “by ‘correlation’ we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.” Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008), 5.

2. Ibid., 7.

3. Ibid., 14.

4. The full passage reads: “Every philosophy is essentially idealism or at least has idealism for its principle, and the question then is only how far this principle is carried out. This applies to philosophy just as much as to religion, for religion, no less than philosophy, will not admit finitude as a true being, an ultimate, an absolute, or as something non-positing, uncreated, eternal. The opposition between idealistic and realistic philosophy is therefore without meaning. A philosophy that attributes to finite existence, as such, true, ultimate, absolute being, does not deserve the name of philosophy.” G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 124.

5. “This subjective idealism, whether it is the unconscious idealism of consciousness in general or is consciously declared and installed as principle, extends only to the *form* of representation according to which a content is mine. In the systematized idealism of subjectivity, this form is declared to be the only true form, one that excludes the form of the objectivity or reality of that content, of its *external existence*. Such an idealism is formal, since it does not take into consideration the content of representation or thought, and therefore does not go past its finitude.” Ibid., 125.

6. Ibid., 348. Di Giovanni’s English translation is more technical than that of A. V. Miller, who translates *absoluter Gegenstoß* as “absolute recoil.” See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1969), 402. All subsequent references to the *Science of Logic* will be to Di Giovanni’s translation.

7. The logic of the absolute recoil occurs in the Doctrine of Essence section of the *Science of Logic*, where the relation between positing and what is posited, or determining and what is determined, is explored in great detail. In the chapter on “Shine,” or reflection, Hegel introduces the movement of *absoluter Gegenstoß*. As Hegel makes clear, “this turning back is only the presupposing of what was antecedently found,” and therefore “the movement, as forward movement, turns immediately around into itself and so is only self-movement—a movement which comes from itself in so far as *positing* reflection is *presupposing* reflection, yet, as *presupposing* reflection, is simply *positing* reflection” (348).

8. Frank Ruda, *For Badiou: Idealism without Idealism* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 67.

9. For Badiou, democratic materialism is summed up by the assertion that “there are only bodies and languages,” whereas materialist dialectics amounts to the claim that “there are only bodies and languages, except that there are

truths.” Badiou associates democratic materialism with the dominant ideology of the twenty-first century, as well as with a form of materialism exemplified by “postmodern” thinkers such as Antonio Negri. See Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009), 1–4.

10. As Ruda makes clear, “democratic materialism can be understood as being a *materialism without idea*, a materialism without idealism, and that a materialist dialectics providing the groundwork for any contemporary, true philosophical enterprise rather needs to be conceived of as what I call an *idealism without idealism*.” Ruda, *For Badiou*, 68–69.

11. Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2014), 72–73.

12. *Ibid.*, 89.

13. The full passage reads: “‘Reconciliation’ between subject and substance means the acceptance of this radical lack of any firm foundational point: the subject is not its own origin, it comes second, it is dependent upon its substantial presuppositions; but these presuppositions also do not have a substantial consistency of their own, but are always retroactively posited.” Slavoj Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void: Economico-Philosophical Spandrels* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017), 236.

14. Ruda has forwarded the thesis that dialectical materialism is a materialism that openly acknowledges its idealist center. See Ruda, *For Badiou*, 67.

15. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 257.

16. John W. Burbidge defines the process of conceiving in Hegel as “that rational dynamic by which we comprehend and understand.” John W. Burbidge, “Conceiving,” in *A Companion to Hegel*, ed. Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2011), 161.

17. As Hegel points out in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, “the concept needs to be considered as form, but only as infinite, fecund form that encompasses the fullness of all content within itself and at the same time releases it from itself.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part 1: Science of Logic*, trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 233.

18. Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), 224.

19. Žižek interprets Hegel’s speculative understanding of absolute recoil as a universal ontological principle. Using Hegel’s “positing the presuppositions” thesis, Žižek maintains that “dialectical materialism is the only true philosophical inheritor of what Hegel designates as the speculative attitude of the thought towards objectivity.” Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 4.

20. Recall Hegel’s famous passage on the relation of language and concrete universality in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “We also express the sensuous as a universal, but what we say is: *This*, i.e., the *universal this*, or we say: *it is*, i.e., *being as such*. We thereby of course do not *represent* to ourselves the universal *This* or being as such, but we express the universal; or, in this sensuous-certainty we do not at all say what we *mean*. However, as we see, language is the more truthful. In language, we immediately refute what we *mean to say*, and since the universal is the

truth of sensuous-certainty, and language only expresses this truth, it is, in that way, not possible at all that we could say what we mean about sensuous being.” G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 62.

21. Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, 58.

22. Ibid.

23. As Fichte asserts, “though the self may exist only for itself, there necessarily arises for it at once an existence external to it; the ground of the latter lies in the former, and is conditioned thereby: self-consciousness and consciousness of something that is to be—not ourselves—are necessarily connected; but the first is to be regarded as the conditioning factor, and the second as the conditioned.” J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 33. Fichte then proceeds to obtain the absolute foundational unconditioned principle of knowledge through a transcendental deduction (see 93–123).

24. As Hegel comments in the *Science of Logic*:

If other Kantians [i.e., Fichte] have expanded on the determining of the *intended object* by the “I” by saying that the objectifying of the “I” is to be regarded as an original and necessary deed of consciousness, so that in this original deed there is not yet the representation of the “I”—which would be only a consciousness of that consciousness, or itself an objectifying of that consciousness—then this objectifying deed, liberated from the opposition of consciousness, is closer to what may be taken simply as *thinking as such*. But this deed should no longer be called consciousness; for consciousness holds within itself the opposition of the “I” and its intended object which is not to be found in that original deed. The name “consciousness” gives it more of a semblance of subjectivity than does the term “*thought*,” which here, however, is to be taken in the absolute sense of *infinite thought*, not as encumbered by the finitude of consciousness; in short, *thought as such*. (41)

25. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 514.

26. As Hegel points out, “If it is not the *truth* which is at issue but only *narration*, as it is the case in pictorial and phenomenal thinking, then we might as well stay with the story that we begin with feelings and intuitions, and that the understanding then extracts a universal or an abstraction from their manifold, for which purpose it quite understandably needs a substrate for these feelings and intuitions which, in the process of abstraction, retains for representation the same complete reality with which it first presented itself.” Ibid., 519.

27. Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, 72.

28. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 519.

29. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 157–62 (A23/B37–A30/B46). It is important to remember that, for Kant, space and time are not included in the table of transcendental categories of the Understanding. Space and time are a priori, pure given intuitions, not concepts. In the “Meta-

physical Exposition” of space, Kant argues that space (and time) are not concepts because, if they were, then we would be able to construct them by arranging their parts to form a consistent whole. Such a move, according to Kant, presupposes that it is possible to have partial representations of space and time. With space, as with time, this is impossible according to Kant because our empirical representations of places and of specific times occur *in* space as such, or *in* time as a whole. The representation of any-space-whatever or any-time-whatever already presupposes space and time in their entirety. See *ibid.*, 175 (A24–25/B39–40).

30. As Kant explains:

In the end, . . . we have no insight into the possibility of such *noumena*, and the domain outside of the sphere of appearances is empty (for us), i.e., we have an understanding that extends farther than sensibility problematically, but no intuition, indeed not even the concept of a possible intuition, through which objects outside of the field of sensibility could be given, and about which the understanding could be employed assertorically. The concept of a noumenon is therefore merely a boundary concept, in order to limit the pretension of sensibility, and therefore only of negative use. But it is nevertheless not invented arbitrarily, but is rather connected with the limitation of sensibility, yet without being able to posit anything positive outside of the domain of the latter. (*Ibid.*, 350)

31. To again quote Kant:

If, therefore, we say: The senses represent objects to us as they appear, but the understanding [represents them] as they are, then the latter is not to be taken in a transcendental but in a merely empirical way, signifying, namely, how they must be represented as objects of experience, in the thoroughgoing connection of appearances, and not how they might be outside of the relation to possible experience and consequently to sense in general, thus as objects of pure understanding. For this will always remain unknown to us, so that it even remains unknown whether such a transcendental (extraordinary) cognition is possible at all, at least as one that stands under our customary categories. With us understanding and sensibility can determine an object only in combination. If we separate them, then we have intuitions without concepts, or concepts without intuitions, but in either case representations that we cannot relate to any determinate object. (*Ibid.*, 352)

32. As Hegel puts it in the *Science of Logic*:

It is precisely in this opposition of the two worlds that *their difference* has disappeared, and what was supposed to be the world existing in and for itself is itself the world of appearance and this last, conversely, the world essential within.—The *world of appearance* is in the first instance determined as reflection into otherness, so that its determinations and concrete existences have their ground and subsistence in an other; but because this other, as other, is likewise *reflected into an other*, the other to



which they both refer is one which sublates itself as other; the two consequently *refer to themselves*; the world of appearance is *within it*, therefore, law equal to itself.—Conversely, the world existing in and for itself is in the first instance self-identical content, exempt from otherness and change; but this content, as complete reflection of the world of appearance into itself, or because its diversity is difference reflected into itself and absolute, consequently contains negativity as a moment and self-reference as reference to otherness; it thereby becomes self-opposed, self-inverting, essenceless content. Further, this content of the world existing in and for itself has thereby also retained the form of *immediate concrete existence*. For it is at first the ground of the world of appearance; but since it has opposition in it, it is equally sublated ground and immediate concrete existence. (447)

This is the same argument that Hegel puts forward in the “Force and the Understanding” chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, especially 96–97 (§157–58).

33. As Hegel puts it in the *Science of Logic*, “thinking in its immanent determinations, and the true nature of things, are one and the same content” (25).

34. “The demonstrated absoluteness of the concept as against the material of experience and, more exactly, the categorial and the reflective determinations of it, consists in this, that as this material appears *outside* and *before* the concept, it has no *truth* but that it has it only in its ideality or in its identity with the concept.” *Ibid.*, 522.

35. *Ibid.*, 527.

36. Hegel writes: “The Logic thus exhibits the self-movement of the absolute idea only as the original *word*, a word which is an *utterance*, but one that in being externally uttered has immediately vanished again. The idea is, therefore, only in this self-determination of *apprehending itself*; it is in *pure thought*, where difference is not yet otherness, but is and remains perfectly transparent to itself.—The logical idea thus has itself, as the *infinite form*, for its content.” *Ibid.*, 736.

37. Jeremy Dunham, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Sean Watson, *Idealism: The History of a Philosophy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), 146.

38. As Hegel memorably asserts in his preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the absolute must be “grasp[ed] . . . and express[ed] . . . not just as *substance* but just as much as *subject*” (12).

39. Béatrice Longuenesse, *Hegel’s Critique of Metaphysics*, trans. Nicole J. Smiek (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27.

40. As Marx says in the *1844 Manuscripts*, “The abstract idea, which without mediation becomes intuiting, is indeed nothing else but abstract thinking that gives itself up and resolves on *intuition*. This entire transition from logic to natural philosophy is nothing else but the transition—so difficult to effect for the abstract thinker, who therefore describes it in such a far-fetched way—from *abstracting* to *intuiting*. The mystical feeling which drives the philosopher forward from abstract thinking to intuiting is *boredom*—the longing for a content.” Karl Marx, *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 3: 1843–1844* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), 344.

41. Longuenesse, *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics*, 28.

42. Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (New York: Verso, 2009), 218.

43. I am primarily thinking here of Marx's famous "Theses on Feuerbach." See Karl Marx, *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 5: 1845–1847* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), 7–8.

44. This is Marx's first thesis. *Ibid.*, 7.

45. *Ibid.*

46. This is Marx's second thesis. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, 8.

48. Étienne Balibar has commented on Marx's dissolution of the traditional dichotomy between representational, contemplative thought and the activity of praxis: "just as traditional materialism in reality conceals an idealist foundation (representation, contemplation), so modern idealism in reality conceals a materialist orientation in the function it attributes to the acting subject, at least if one accepts that there is a latent conflict between the idea of representation (interpretation, contemplation) and that of activity (labour, practice, transformation, change). And what he proposes is quite simply to explode the contradiction, to dissociate representation and subjectivity and allow the category of practical activity to emerge in its own right." Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2014), 25.

49. Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 3*, 187.

50. Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 807.

51. This is opposed to "materialism with an Idea." The difference between the two is that a "materialism with *an* Idea" assumes that there exists an alternate Idea that could constitute dialectical materialism's idealist core. My argument in this chapter has been to suggest that there can only ever be one Idea: namely, Hegel's absolute Idea.

# Objects after Subjects: Hegel's Broken Ontology

Todd McGowan

## Finishing with Fichte

In his two introductions to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte steps back from his own project for a moment to make a claim about all philosophy that seems uncontested. According to Fichte, philosophy is inevitably caught up in a perpetual struggle between idealism and what he calls dogmatism (but which we would identify as materialism). Though Fichte hopes to sway the reader in the direction of his version of Kantian idealism, he freely admits that neither side can ultimately persuade the other. In the last instance, one is either an idealist or a materialist simply by inclination, even though idealism has distinct advantages over materialism, which is why Fichte thinks that the choice is a no-brainer.<sup>1</sup>

Since both idealists and materialists operate with an unquestioned fundamental principle, they run up against this principle when they attempt to undermine the opposing position. Thus, in order to convince his reader about the superiority of idealism relative to materialism, Fichte has no alternative but to resort to name-calling. He claims, "What sort of philosophy one chooses depends, therefore, on what sort of man one is. . . . A person indolent by nature or dulled and distorted by mental servitude, learned luxury, and vanity will never raise himself to the level of idealism."<sup>2</sup> In other words, if you opt for materialism over idealism, you're not a real man. Fichte makes it clear that the idealist has moral rectitude (or at least the desire for it) while materialism reflects a dissolute character. Fichte's argument, such as it is, consists in claiming that one would not want to be a materialist because of what it says about the materialist, not because of the discernible flaws in the position itself.

Subsequent thinkers haven't found Fichte's attempt at moral blackmail all that convincing. In fact, after Marx inaugurates his materialist revolution that upends German Idealism, the moral valence of the decision undergoes a thoroughgoing transformation. After Marx, material-

ism in its many guises—Marxism, cultural materialism, Foucaultian historicism, neo-Darwinism, and so on—takes up the moral high ground that Fichte tries to accord to idealism.<sup>3</sup> Idealism, for its part, becomes fideism, spiritualism, and cultural imperialism, among other unappealing manifestations.

But what doesn't change with the moral triumph of materialism over idealism is the sense that Fichte is correct about the basic problem: neither the materialist nor the idealist can possibly convince the other due to the necessity of a fundamental assumption that grounds each position. At no point does Marx attempt to refute the idealist position through an argument. Instead, he meets idealism with assertion and ridicule. His famous proclamation in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* is poetic, but it never treats idealism as a serious position to be countered. He writes, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."<sup>4</sup> Marx hopes to convince the reader through the device of antimetabole, not by confronting his idealist interlocutors like Kant and Fichte as opponents worthy of argument.

It is as if idealism and materialism each form a hermetic whole impervious to external critique and lacking a point of contact with the other. Just as Fichte dismisses materialism as a home for the morally reprobate, Marx dismisses idealism as an ideological illusion produced by the prevailing relations of production. Neither has recourse to a developed line of thought to make the case. If it is the case that philosophy, unlike the natural sciences, never makes progress but continually returns to the same problems without resolving them, perhaps the reason for this lack of movement lies in this intractable opposition that resides at the heart of all philosophical questioning.

If we accept Fichte's dictum about idealism and materialism, there is no choice but just to choose.<sup>5</sup> Even worse, it is probably the case that we make our choice unconsciously, rendering it not much of a choice at all. Rather than trying to discover whether idealism or materialism makes the more convincing case, one must decide which mode of philosophizing best suits one's personality or moral proclivities. Though this conclusion is philosophically dissatisfying, it also seems inevitable given the lack of ground where idealism and materialism might speak to each other.

But to throw up our hands and accept Fichte's verdict is to proceed too quickly. Although Fichte and Marx share this verdict about the absolute nature of the choice between idealism and materialism, the figure that bridges the historical gap between them—that is, Hegel—also shows us the way out of this binary opposition. Hegel begins his philosophical trajectory as a Kantian. He starts by accepting Fichte's wager

that idealism is the more superior philosophical path, but at the moment when Hegel becomes Hegel, he comes to see the inseparability of idealism and materialism.

By developing a philosophy based on the necessity of contradiction, Hegel shows that the choice that Fichte offers is a false one. Throughout his life, Hegel never abandons the moniker “idealist.” But he does insist that, unlike the subjective idealism of Kant and Fichte, he advances a philosophy of objective idealism. This move seems like a stereotypical Hegelian gesture: when faced with two opposing positions, Hegel refuses to choose and synthesizes them into one. If we accept the image of Hegel as a philosopher of synthesis, then this surely must be the verdict, and it should lead us to reject this failure to choose between the alternatives that Fichte presents us with. Objective idealism does actually obviate the necessity of Fichte’s absolute choice, although, importantly, it does so not through a process of synthesis—as the clichéd understanding of Hegel would have it—but rather through a recognition of the necessary contradiction that undermines our thinking. Hegel sees that the path of idealism leads us to materialism. It becomes its other through becoming absolute.<sup>6</sup>

### Eating before Knowing

What awakens Hegel from his Kantian and Fichtean slumber is his encounter with his practical existence. Our knowledge cannot confine itself to phenomena if we cannot do so in our practice. In taking this step, Hegel performs a radicalization of Fichte and Fichte’s own treatment of Kant. Just as Fichte grants priority to Kant’s moral philosophy over the theoretical in order to find a philosophical foundation in the subject’s act, Hegel recognizes how the moral act reveals that we cannot confine ourselves to phenomena and remain Kantian idealists. Acting lifts us out of our hermetically sealed idealism.

Ironically, though the moral law creates the fundamental cleavage between the subject and all other beings, it also provides the basis for Hegel’s materialist turn. Morality cannot remain simply what the subject ought to do. It must make itself actual. Or, as Hegel puts it in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “morality . . . does not remain disposition in contrast to action, but proceeds to act or to realize itself.”<sup>7</sup> With this claim, Hegel articulates a radical challenge to Kantian morality, which, as he sees it, remains content with always trying to actualize itself but never doing so. Hegel constantly identifies Kantian morality with the *Sollen*, or the

“ought,” which is to say that he accuses Kant of moral hysteria. While proclaiming that he wants a moral order or a kingdom of ends, Kant actually wants to continue striving for the kingdom of ends. He desires his desire rather than its realization. Despite the great leap forward that his morality accomplishes, Kant cannot envision morality being accomplished, but requires that it always *ought* to be accomplished.

For Hegel, this position leads to a basic immorality at the heart of Kantian morality. Kant retains his moral probity by refusing to get morality’s hands dirty, while Hegel recognizes that a pure morality has the effect of licensing an immoral world in opposition to it. Hegel believes that the Kantian moral subject is responsible for this opposing immoral world because it is theoretically necessary for the subject’s morality. Kant needs someone—the world—to play the bad guy, which is how hysteria operates. This challenge to Kant on the terrain of practical reason provides the path out of Kant and Fichte’s hermetically sealed idealism. Morality opens Hegel to the necessity of injecting materialism into the idealist edifice.

The moral act must transform the world. It touches and involves itself with the world that it aims to change. As a result, we cannot conceive morality as removed from the stain of the world in the way that Kant would like to. The epistemological implications of this revolution in the nature of morality are just as transformative. Our knowledge cannot remain at a remove from what it knows. It cannot treat what it encounters as phenomena distinct from things-in-themselves.<sup>8</sup>

In his critique of Fichte’s effort to sustain the idealist barrier between phenomena and things-in-themselves, Hegel contends that when Kant advocates for this position he exhibits less intelligence than any other animal. In the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel states, “Of a metaphysics prevalent today which maintains that we cannot know things because they are absolutely shut to us, it might be said that not even the animals are so stupid as these metaphysicians; for they go after things, seize and consume them.”<sup>9</sup> In the act of eating, animals demonstrate that the things they encounter do not have an independent existence, that they are not self-identical. If the things that populate the external world were inaccessible to us, we would not be able to devour them. It therefore follows for Hegel that we can also know them.

If our moral acts must change the world rather than merely striving to do so, then we are necessarily involved in what we act on. Kant’s moral separation from acting parallels his epistemological separation from things-in-themselves. The actuality of the moral deed gives the lie to both fantasies of separation. When we act, we cut into the world of objects and reveal that it is not epistemologically off-limits in the way

that Kant and Fichte would have it. By acting, what we reveal inherently entails materialism.

### With Tenderness There's Something Missing

The other key moment in Hegel's thought occurs in his response to the Kantian antinomies formulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. When Kant addresses the ultimate metaphysical questions, he discovers that our reason always runs into antinomies—points at which it would require itself to accept contradictory truths. Kant tries to solve the questions of whether the universe has a beginning in space and time, whether there is a simple substance, whether subjects are free or determined, and whether there is a necessary being (or God). Each question leads Kant to a dead end, where he can either disprove both possibilities with the first two or prove both possibilities with the last two. This contradictory result leads Kant to the conclusion that we just cannot reason about what lies beyond our sense experience. The only use of reason becomes a negative one: it confines us epistemologically to the empirical reality of possible experience and thus to the use of our understanding. The contradictions of reason show us that we cannot think our way to the thing-in-itself.

Although Hegel quibbles with the reasoning that Kant employs to arrive at the antinomies, he does not reject the antinomies themselves. He admits that Kant has a point. If we try to reason about things-in-themselves, we do run into contradictions. In the *Science of Logic*, he notes that the Kantian antinomies are “contradictions, against which reason must necessarily (according to the Kantian expression) *collide*.”<sup>10</sup> After he voices this apparently complete agreement with Kant, however, Hegel draws the opposite conclusion from that of his predecessor. According to Hegel, the contradiction doesn't mark reason's failure but its success. The moment at which reason runs into contradiction indicates a contradiction in being itself that reason grasps through its own contradiction.

Kant misses this conclusion, Hegel argues, because he slanders reason in order to mistakenly substantialize the external world, to consider things-in-themselves as substantial entities that are not subjected to contradictions like our reason. Further along in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel formulates this charge against Kant. He states:

It is excessive tenderness for the world to keep contradiction away from it, to transfer it to spirit instead, to reason and to leave it there unre-

solved. In fact, it is spirit that is strong enough that it can endure contradiction, but it is also spirit that knows how to resolve it. But nowhere does the so-called world (call it objective, real world, or, in the manner of transcendental idealism, subjective intuition and sense-content determined by the category of the understanding), nowhere, however you call it, does it escape contradiction, but it is not capable of enduring it and for that reason it is abandoned to coming and ceasing to be.<sup>11</sup>

Kant moves too quickly to spot a failure in reason rather than a defect in external reality. He fails to see that the difference between external reality and thinking in relation to contradiction is that our thinking can become aware of it rather than blindly suffer it as external reality does.

By identifying contradiction in things-in-themselves through the examination of Kant's use of reason, Hegel effectively overcomes the opposition that Fichte lays out between idealism and materialism. This is Hegel's key philosophical move, one that Marx quickly elides for future thinkers by restoring the opposition. While Hegel remains nominally on the side of idealism, he nonetheless forges an idealism based on the recognition that while our ideas transcend their material sources, they nonetheless bear the imprint of these sources and reveal them to us. He is an idealist because he recognizes that only ideas can reveal the inescapability of materialism.

This move from reason's collision with contradiction to the insistence on a contradiction in being itself has historically caused many thinkers in Hegel's wake to turn away from him altogether. One could even make the argument that the analytic tradition's allergy to Hegel—at least until recent years—derives from a belief in the illegitimacy of this move. According to Hegel's most outspoken enemy within this tradition, Karl Popper, Hegel's view of contradiction renders him the enemy of a truly scientific view of the world. Popper contends, "Since contradictions are the means by which science progresses, he concludes that contradictions are not only permissible and unavoidable, but also highly desirable. This is a Hegelian doctrine which must destroy all science and all progress. For if contradictions are unavoidable and desirable, there is no need to eliminate them, and so all progress must come to an end."<sup>12</sup> When we first glance at the respective arguments of Hegel and Popper, the strength of Popper's claim is undeniable. The move from a claim about reason to a claim about being seems unwarranted when we consider how alien our thoughts are to what occurs in external reality. Hegel's attempt to overcome Fichte's absolute divide between idealism and materialism appears to founder on the illegitimacy of the move.

We think things all the time that have no corresponding existence



in external reality. From unicorns to fantasized sexual encounters with those more attractive than us, the points where our thinking fails to be adequate enough to reveal anything about external reality are infinite. But as Hegel would see it, the examples of the unicorn and the fantasized sexual encounter do not reveal our thought's inadequacy relative to reality but the converse. It is reality that fails to be adequate to thought. Thought is capable of forming a creature and a romantic liaison that don't exist. Even when we deal with horses rather than unicorns and real sexual encounters rather than fantasized ones, it is thought that gives them their value. An unthinking sexual encounter is impossible, but if it were to occur, a fantasized one would be infinitely more rewarding. An unthinking sexual encounter would be a purely mechanical function and thus completely valueless. As a result, we should not be too quick to assume that when reason encounters a contradiction, it is the fault of reason rather than external reality itself.

Contradiction manifests itself in the becoming of every entity that exists. There is no entity that simply is what it is. Instead, every entity is both itself and what it is not. This is the fundamental contradiction that defines the entity as such. If any entity were only itself and had no reference to what it was not, it could not exist in contrast with other entities. Contradiction is revealed through interaction. For Hegel, there is no pure being. Pure being could never act, move, speak, or manifest itself in any way. We know apodictically that there is no pure being simply because we are capable of experiencing that things are—and this holds even if we are only experiencing the fantasy or dream that things are.

By reversing Kant's valuation of external reality and thought in relation to contradiction, Hegel forges a new way of conceiving the difference between the subject and other existing entities. Whereas contradiction externally undermines every entity, the subject is able to grasp contradiction and make it its own. In this way, it has the capacity to undermine itself rather than just submit to its ruin as all other entities do. Paradoxically, the privilege of spirit lies in its ability to destroy itself rather than to simply be destroyed. Hegel's subject emerges through a fundamental masochism that defines it.

## The Philosopher's Stone

When they look back on the Western philosophical tradition, contemporary critics of idealism like the object-oriented ontologists tend to adopt a more sanguine attitude relative to Martin Heidegger than to his philo-

sophical forebears such as Kant and Hegel.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Kant and Hegel, Heidegger gives things their due and doesn't spend all his time in the prison-house of our thought. Though he continues to separate *Dasein* from other objects due to its ability to raise the question of Being, Heidegger does not become caught up in the epistemological questions about the reality of the external world that trip up the idealists. He famously claims that the real scandal of philosophy is not that we have failed to prove the existence of external reality, but that this has become a problem in the first place.

For Graham Harman, one of the most prominent object-oriented ontologists, Heidegger's analysis of the tool opens up the possibility of eliminating the priority of the rift between subject and object. Heidegger's turn from subjectivity to *Dasein* marks an important move in the direction of the object. According to Harman, "only by dehumanizing Heidegger's tool-analysis can we remove it from the chilling shadow of Kantian critical philosophy. We do this by endlessly multiplying the levels of the world, ceasing to regard the rift between objects and human perception as the sole chasm in the universe."<sup>14</sup> Taking Heidegger as one of his points of departure, Harman deconstructs the absolute divide between subject and object that haunts Western philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

That said, Heidegger does not completely eliminate the difference between the human and other beings. Though he does not conceive of this relationship in terms of the subject and the object, he does grant the human a privileged place that distances him from both materialism and from Hegel. The contrast between Hegel and Heidegger reveals how Hegel's insistence on remaining within the idealist problematic and taking it to its end point has the effect of producing a more thoroughgoing understanding of materiality than we can attain by bypassing idealism altogether, as Heidegger and the object-oriented ontologists attempt to do. For Heidegger, the contrast between the stone and the human sheds significant light on the status of the human relative to other beings. In Heidegger's famous formulation from his lecture series *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, he states: "[1.] the stone is *worldless*; [2.] the animal is *poor in world*; [3.] man is *world-forming*."<sup>16</sup> Though Heidegger creates a scale of the relationship to world that each entity has, he does recognize that each entity necessarily has such a relationship. Even the worldless stone relates to the world as what it doesn't have.

Heidegger's theorization of the difference between the stone and the human, when one thinks about it, almost has the status of common sense. Though it's not exactly clear how the animal is poor in world, or what this even means, the contrast between the worldlessness of the stone and human world-forming corresponds to the predominant view of this

relationship. The stone is worldless because it lacks the ability to consider itself in terms of its background. It has no understanding of what constitutes it and thus no world. The human, on the other hand, produces a world through language, which serves as the milieu in which it relates to all other beings. We cannot imagine human interaction with other humans or with objects without this interaction taking place in a world. In this sense, it seems certain that Heidegger must be right.

But this is a point in Heidegger's thought where he pays a steep theoretical price for the abandonment of subjectivity for the sake of *Da-sein* (or here, "man"). He is able to conceive of the human as world-making and as inextricably tied to the world—he formulates this as "being-in-the-world" in *Being and Time* and elsewhere—only insofar as he refuses to think about the problem of subjectivity. Turning away from subjectivity helps to narrow the gap between the human and the object world, but at the same time it leaves Heidegger unable to consider how subjectivity might be able to inform us about things.

### The Stone Breaks

For Kant, Heidegger's claim that the stone is worldless would already be going too far. Though we might discuss the stone as a phenomenon, we cannot say anything about its status in-itself. By identifying it with worldlessness, Heidegger steps beyond the limits that govern knowledge and thereby throws the coherence of the world into question. In Kant's thought, our worldliness depends on *not* making claims about the worldlessness of stones. We can only talk about stones as they appear in the world of appearances rather than as they are in-themselves. If we try to go beyond this limit, we find that the coherence of the world breaks apart, as Kant shows in the first antinomy of pure reason.

This is precisely why object-oriented ontologists find Heidegger's philosophy more hospitable than Kant's. Even though Heidegger sustains a radical difference between the human and the nonhuman, he does not remain trapped in the problem of epistemology in the way that Kant seems to. Heidegger believes that we have the ability to make ontological claims about the stone because he refuses to grant epistemology priority over ontology. Our knowledge of the stone is possible on the basis of our fundamental being-in-the-world that includes the stone.

Heidegger rejects out of hand the division of things into phenomena and things-in-themselves. In *Being and Time*, he notes, "'Behind' the phenomena of phenomenology there is essentially nothing else; on

the other hand, what is to become a phenomenon can be hidden. And just because the phenomena are proximally and for the most part *not* given, there is a need for phenomenology."<sup>17</sup> Heidegger's philosophical enterprise consists in stripping back the obfuscations of thought through which phenomena undergo a transformation and become objects to be known (or not). But the moment that he avoids the distinction between subject and object, Heidegger loses the ability to recognize the nature of the difference between the subject and other entities. Like the object-oriented ontologists who embrace him, Heidegger fails to see that the subject's relationship to contradiction holds the key not only to itself but to objective reality as well.

Similar to Heidegger in the *Fundamental Questions of Metaphysics*, Hegel distinguishes between inorganic matter, organic matter, and subjectivity. But for Hegel the difference moves in almost precisely the opposite direction. Like Heidegger's stone, Hegel's subject is worldless. We can define subjectivity only by its alienation from the world. The subject doesn't belong to the world in which it exists, but this alienation provides the basis for the subject's freedom. The worldlessness of subjectivity enables the subject to escape the external destruction that the world unleashes on inorganic matter.

Although Hegel doesn't theorize the stone as world-forming, he does see it as fully in the world in a way that the subject cannot be. Organic life shares the worldliness of the inorganic, but it is able to hold at bay the world's destructiveness more than the inorganic. In the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel articulates his riposte to Heidegger *avant la lettre*. He states, "Organic life alone is characterized by its perpetual self-restoration in the process of its own destruction. Inorganic matter which cannot stand this struggle must fall into decay; more solid things, it is true, preserve themselves, but they too are unceasingly attacked by air."<sup>18</sup> Hegel defines the organic as that which has the ability not to be simply a victim of its world. Unlike the inorganic, the organic reacts to the destruction that its world heaps on it with self-restoration. The stone, in contrast, simply erodes and breaks apart because it fails to be worldless enough. It is not just in the world, but wholly of the world.

The stone is so much of the world that it has nothing else but its world. It cannot resist the damage that the world inflicts on it. This contrasts the stone not just with organic life but ultimately with subjectivity and what Hegel calls *Geist* or spirit. Spirit is the subject's alienation from its world, its capacity not just to suffer from contradiction but to enact it. In a poetic aside in the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel characterizes the relationship between stones and spirit as one of longing. He states, "the very stones cry out and raise themselves to spirit."<sup>19</sup> Stones cry out

as they break apart. The sound of their succumbing to contradiction points toward the emergence of the subject, which makes contradiction its own principle.

The stone merely endures contradiction and is eventually destroyed by it. The stone's inability to be self-identical results ultimately in its destruction through erosion or some other violent worldly end. We know that the stone is not self-identical, that it is not an independent substance, because it is capable of breaking. But the stone is not a subject, a being that makes its ability to break apart its founding principle. Though it can suffer violence from the external world, the stone lacks the ability to perform any violence toward itself. It is divided against itself, but not in a way that grants it any purchase on contradiction.

### The Subject Breaks Itself

Hegel divorces the subject from the thing-in-itself just as decisively as Kant does. But the difference between Kant and Hegel is that the latter brings the subject back to the thing-in-itself through the exploration of the divorce. The stone and the subject share a contradictory existence. Both are internally divided or at odds with themselves. This is why both are susceptible to breaking. But the relationship to breaking that the stone and the subject have constitutes their difference.

Hegel defines subjectivity by the capacity that the subject has for being at odds with itself and recognizing this contradiction. Rather than enduring contradiction as an external force in the way that the stone does, the subject can make this contradiction its own. It does so when it acts against itself. As Hegel puts it in the *Philosophy of Right*, "I have these limbs and my life only *in so far as I so will it*; the animal cannot mutilate or destroy itself, but the human being can."<sup>20</sup> Though the identification of self-destruction with the subject's difference from other beings seems less a privilege than a liability, it follows directly from Hegel's recognition that idealism must also be materialism.

The subject's act of self-destruction does not manifest itself solely through suicide (which Hegel *does* see as an index of the subject's privileged status in relation to other beings), but primarily through thinking itself. Thought is an act of profound violence against being. In the act of thinking, the subject refuses to suffer contradiction as an external force that destroys it. Thinking is the primary way that the subject does violence to itself. This is why subjects do what they can to retreat from thought and try to imitate stones. But subjectivity always has its revenge: the desire to

become a stone requires precisely the self-destruction that defines subjectivity. The avoidance of subjectivity is the path back to it.

The subject distinguishes itself from the stone by becoming the engine for its own destruction. Contradiction offers Hegel a way of overcoming the recalcitrant opposition between idealism and materialism without shortchanging either side. Contradiction divides the material world from itself, but it is only through ideas that we can recognize this division. Rather than choosing between idealism and materialism, we must turn to idealism and follow where it leads absolutely in order to become authentic materialists.

## Notes

1. One could think of the choice between idealism and materialism along the lines of the choice of neurosis as theorized by Freud. For Freud, this choice is not a choice at all in the way that we usually think of the term. It is an unconscious choice, a basic disposition of character that has nothing to do with empirical experience. Freud writes that "the grounds for determining the choice of neurosis are entirely . . . in the nature of dispositions and are independent of experiences which operate pathogenically." Sigmund Freud, "The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis: A Contribution to the Problem of Choice of Neurosis," trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1958), 317. One could say precisely the same thing about the choice between idealism and materialism as Fichte lays it out.

2. J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 16.

3. Perhaps the high point of materialism's moral superiority occurs in Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History." This essay attracts so many adherents in part because it professes the morality of the historical materialist to other positions. This becomes fully apparent when Benjamin writes: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain." Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 392. Brushing history against the grain is the materialist equivalent of the idealist embracing the moral law.

4. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 21.

5. Because he remains within Fichte's fundamental opposition, Alain Badiou sees the first gesture of materialist philosophy as an axiomatic decision. He

states: “the thesis of the infinity of being is necessarily an ontological decision, which is to say an axiom. Without such a decision it will remain forever possible for being to be essentially finite.” Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005), 148. If one fails to make the decision for the thesis of infinity, one cannot escape the idealism of finitude that traps thinkers such as Martin Heidegger.

6. Given how idealism leads to materialism in Hegel’s philosophy, it is not at all surprising that many contemporary followers of Hegel, such as Slavoj Žižek and Adrian Johnston, proudly wear the materialist banner.

7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 366.

8. This corrective applies even to Henry Allison’s interpretation of Kant’s epistemology. According to Allison, the distinction between phenomena and things-in-themselves is not a distinction between what we think about and what exists in the external world. Instead, it represents a purely epistemological distinction. As Allison understands Kant, he is simply claiming that approaching things as things-in-themselves rather than as phenomena appearing to us leads to contradictions. In this way, Allison avoids Hegel’s critique of Kant, which points out that while Kant claims that we can’t know anything about things-in-themselves, he implies that we know them well enough to know that we can’t know anything about them. Kant erects a prohibition that the very erection of it violates. Allison enables us to escape this pitfall but leads us directly into another: we find ourselves even more removed from the things that we know. See Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983).

9. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature: Part Two of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 9.

10. G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 217. The German reads: “Kant gibt diesen Begriff von den Antinomien, daß sie nicht sophistische Künsteleien seien, sondern Widersprüche, auf welche die Vernunft notwendig *stoße* (nach Kantischem Ausdrucke) müsse.” George di Giovanni translates this passage as follows: “Kant’s conception of the antinomies is that they ‘are not sophistic artifices but contradictions reason must *run up against*.’ This last is a Kantian expression.” Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 158.

11. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 201.

12. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Volume 2: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), 39.

13. Although some object-oriented ontologists, such as Jane Bennett, readily take up the mantle of materialism, other major figures, including Graham Harman and Levi Bryant, dissociate object-oriented ontology from both idealism and materialism. What all object-oriented ontologists share, however, is their rejection of the idealist transcendental structure that Kant develops. Even if they are not uniformly materialist, they are uniformly anti-idealist.

14. Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 192.

15. Even though no champions of object-oriented ontology see themselves as the inheritors of Jacques Derrida and deconstruction—Harman, for instance, explicitly denies this influence (see his *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* [New York: Penguin, 2017], 198–209)—they nonetheless follow the method that he takes up when confronting established philosophical differences. For the object-oriented ontologists, the difference between the subject and the object world has no privilege relative to other differences between objects. In the same way, Derrida deconstructs a series of privileged differences—between speech and writing, man and woman, human and animal, and so on. For Derrida, the two terms of these privileged differences obscure other differences that we must also take into account. For instance, discussion about the difference between the human and the animal hides the differences among animals. This opposition falsely enables us to conceive of all different animals under the category of the animal. Similarly, according to Harman and his fellow object-oriented ontologists, the difference between subject and object covers over the difference among objects.

16. Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 177.

17. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1962), 60.

18. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 109.

19. *Ibid.*, 15.

20. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 78.



# The Nature of Dialectical Materialism in Hegel and Marx

Andrew Cole

It has been rumoured round the town that I have compared the stars to a rash on an organism where the skin erupts into a countless mass of red spots; or to an ant-heap in which, too, there is Understanding and necessity. In fact, I do rate what is concrete higher than what is abstract, and an animality that develops into no more than a slime, higher than the starry host.

—Hegel

A man who walks on his head, ladies and gentlemen, a man who walks on his head sees the sky below, as an abyss.

—Celan

It's time to rethink, if not isolate from the long and often fraught history of interpretation, Marx's most familiar ideas in order to construct a viable Marxian materialist philosophy, or to at least recognize what kind of philosophy unites both his early and late works, which are often said to be distinctly different in outlook and temper—with the later works in fact representing a break from philosophy. Of course, you need high hopes to pursue this project of discerning what's philosophical about Marx, because some of his best readers today, to recall the sentiments of both Karl Korsch and Étienne Balibar, insist that Marxism amounts to non-philosophy, or a philosophy that cannot annihilate itself soon enough at the moment of description, praxis, or revolution.<sup>1</sup> A philosophy that cancels itself at the moment of its expression seems strange, but it's a familiar problem. It indicates how Hegelian such a philosophy already is in its grounds of possibility, with negation as its primary mode, and so

why there were ever arguments about Marx's Hegelianism is beyond me. But this is indeed our problem—the problem of Hegel and what is, or is not, Hegelian about Marx, be he the young Marx who drunkenly caroused in Stralow, or the bedraggled adult Marx photographed by John Mayall in 1875.

Marx didn't exactly encourage readers to be deeply philosophical about his work when he said that "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it"—though one hastens to ask whether once we have changed the world we can get back to doing philosophy, now the prerogative and privilege of all.<sup>2</sup> We mustn't, in other words, be restricted to performing philosophical reflection only after, as *The German Ideology* requires, a stint of daytime labor—cattle prodding, hunting, gardening, what have you. We can, that is, think about Marx's philosophy knowing that he himself enjoyed philosophizing, lost in a cloud of cigar smoke in his study while he wrote at some ungodly morning hour when no one was kicking at his door to collect debts. After all, it was Marx who, in refusing the nomination for president of the International Working Men's Association in 1866, admitted that "he was a head worker and not a hand worker."<sup>3</sup> Marx liked thinking—and Hegel.

Here I will make a very straightforward claim about the Hegelian ideas within Marx, suggesting that he adopts what I call Hegel's "elemental materialism"—a kind of philosophical materialism, dialectical in character, that foregrounds the elements over matter. These elements are key terms—concepts, even—in Hegel's thinking. They are not exactly the four elements discovered by Empedocles and celebrated by Aristotle, but rather the elements that Hegel reconceptualizes in an idealist rejoinder to the materialist determinism of contemporary physics and chemistry.<sup>4</sup> Below I will define what exactly these elements are, describing along the way how Hegel's idealist response to scientific materialism in the *Philosophy of Nature* offers precisely the kind of materialist materialism (if you will) that would appeal to Marx, even though Marx on occasion criticized Hegel for idealizing materiality, for making what's concrete abstract, and for rendering the real problems of labor and surplus value into airy notions about freedom and the World Spirit. My point will be that while Marx claims to reject Hegelian idealism, he in fact embraces Hegelian elemental materialism both in his early works and in his late works. To turn the thing around: Hegel, I will suggest, stands right where we wouldn't expect him, not only at the theoretical core of Marx's historical materialism, but as the very version of a dialectical mode of thinking that Marx always embraced, a dialectical habit of thought that uses the same language and the same techniques to parse matter and ideas, materialities and histories, stuff and spirit—a materialism that (to echo

Lenin) would be stupid without a dash of idealism and that puts us in mind of tried-and-true “dialectical materialism.”<sup>5</sup>

By the title to this chapter, I acknowledge that I am entertaining anachronism in naming Hegel’s thinking—specifically, the elemental materialism seen in virtually every major work of his—“dialectical materialism.” (Plekhanov coined the phrase in an essay on Hegel, Marx, and materialism.<sup>6</sup>) But I do this not only to say that there is great commonality between Hegel and Engels and Lenin, as the latter two themselves already knew, but also to demonstrate, as if by the collision of peanut butter and chocolate, that in Hegel you have two great tastes that go great together: dialectics and materialism. Any so-called dialectical materialism must come to terms with the features of Hegel’s dialectic that were always materialist, even if those features aren’t materialist in exactly the way we think of the term today or yesterday.

### The Materialism of Historical Materialism

It would probably help to start out by stating what’s meant by the term “historical materialism.” Antonio Gramsci long ago remarked that “it has been forgotten that in the case of a very common expression [historical materialism] one should put the accent on the first term—‘historical’—and not on the second, which is of metaphysical origin.”<sup>7</sup> For Gramsci, there is old school materialism (as metaphysics), and there is historical materialism (absent the metaphysics). He has a point in this emphasis and distinction insofar as it is difficult to conceptualize historical materialism as a philosophical materialism, but far easier to understand that Marxism itself has an interest in history—in particular, in the human effort at making history, individually and universally. To be sure, it remains a lingering question of how Marxism could be not only a philosophy but a philosophy of matter, or a version of the philosophical position that matter constitutes all reality and is even in some unknown way the basis for thought. But it is certainly evident that Marxism, when defined as *historical* materialism, focuses on the practical activities of human beings across time and place, as Engels declares in the introduction to the English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*: “I use . . . the term ‘historical materialism’ to designate the view of the course of history, which seeks the ultimate causes and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, with the consequent division of society into distinct classes and the struggles of these classes.”<sup>8</sup>

Historical materialism, then, can be said to move the focus from matter to social practices and social forces—from raw, inaesthetic nature and inert things to economic base and the ineluctable necessity that defines the human struggle for survival, subsistence, poesis, and that undoes the selfsame. And this view accords with Marx's and Engels's thinking about historical materialism in *The German Ideology*: "This conception of history depends on our ability to expound the real process of production, starting out from the material production of life itself, and to comprehend the form of intercourse connected with this and created by this mode of production . . . as the basis of all history."<sup>9</sup> It is here that historical materialism takes up a variety of technical particulars, as it moves away from ruminations about humanity in a "state of nature" to a discussion of the forces of production (i.e., infrastructure, machines, mills, raw materials, labor)<sup>10</sup> and the relations of production (i.e., the relations between producers determined by which class owns the means of production). As a historical materialist, then, you can look at how the forces of production and the relations of production constitute a general mode of production, and examine how over time the forces of production change, putting pressure on the relations of production and generating the very contradictions that compel the overall mode of production to remake itself and reabsorb the aberrant forces of production.

But let's keep in focus the problem, because you may already be wondering what makes materialism so different from historical materialism—if both have something to do with matter in the long run—or why readers of Marx would prefer not to think of historical materialism as a kind of philosophical materialism. Fredric Jameson offers the best summation of the problem when he writes that "Marxism is . . . not a mechanical but a historical materialism: it does not assert the primacy of matter so much as it insists on an ultimate determination by the mode of production. Indeed, if one likes to brandish epithets, it must be remarked that the grounding of materialism in one or another conception of matter is rather the hallmark of bourgeois ideology from the eighteenth-century materialisms all the way to nineteenth-century positivism and determinism (itself a bourgeois rather than a Marxian term and concept)."<sup>11</sup> There is certainly a difference in talking about, on the one hand, "the mode of production"—say, feudalism—as an "ultimate determination," or what Engels thinks of as the "last instance," and, on the other hand, propounding a view of matter or atoms as the basis of all reality or (ridiculously) as a model for human collectives, as you find in both Lucretius and Althusser. But as you can see in Jameson's words, to speak of Marxism as a philosophical materialism is to talk of ideology. It is to say that philosophical materialism is ideology, plain and simple,

whereas it is my wager that the elemental materialism we find in Hegel and Marx is a counter-ideological practice that defines what we fondly call dialectical materialism or, for that matter, “critique.”

## The Materialist Method

Marx’s method is just such a practice, and we would do well to think about his method as it’s defined by the philosophical terms Marx always adopts to discuss the momentous historical event that was the transition from feudalism to capitalism, as detailed in both the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, among other texts. My question here is: is Marx’s account of the emergence of capitalism from feudalism consistent with some kind of philosophical materialism? Here, I am trying to estrange Marx’s thought, rethinking his materialism by looking closely at his language, and doing so ultimately within the Hegelian frame.

The first term we must encounter is “dissolution” (or, in the German, *Auflösung*). By “dissolution,” Marx means to describe that process whereby political, social, and economic conditions fall apart and decompose into constituent elements before recombining and transforming into some new totality that nonetheless (in the Hegelian fashion) preserves features of the previous formation. To take two initial examples from the *Grundrisse*, Marx states that “the development of the forces of production dissolves” the older forms of production, and that “their dissolution is itself a development of the human productive forces.”<sup>12</sup> He also says that “all the dissolved relations were possible only with a definite degree of development of the material (and hence also intellectual) forces of production.”<sup>13</sup>

What we want to understand is how dissolution is development. And what we want to contemplate is that middle space between “dissolution” (*Auflösung*) and “development” (*Entwicklung*)—decomposition as a mode of composition. This is some kind of “process of history,” as Marx calls it, that eventually transforms feudalism into capitalism. It is a historical process that requires in fact an entire series of co-temporal and, one might even say, spatialized dissolutions. For example, in the transition from feudalism to capitalism there is first the “*dissolution* of the [laborer’s] relation to the earth—land and soil—as [the] natural condition of production.” Then there is the dissolution of all forms of property and corporate life, such as “manufactures, namely *craft*, *artisan work*; bound up with it, the guild-corporation system etc.”<sup>14</sup> There is also the “*dissolution* . . . of the relations in which the *workers themselves* . . . still belong *directly among the*

*objective conditions of production.*"<sup>15</sup> And, finally, there is the "dissolution of relations of production in which . . . use value predominates," and so forth.<sup>16</sup> Marx says that all of these dissolutions, these "*Auflösungsprozessen*," must be in place before the "free worker"—that is, the worker who is by need and necessity "free" to sell his or her labor power for a wage within capitalism—appears as both an identity and a concept.<sup>17</sup>

Now, there's plenty that's Hegelian about Marx's thinking in the *Grundrisse*, as many readers have pointed out. But it's telling that he doesn't always use the loaded and expected verb *aufheben* (to sublate) in these passages, and in fact seems to want to give the verb *aufösen* a dialectical meaning that accounts for its double sense in the German: *aufösen* means both to dissolve and to resolve, a word that in one utterance describes a complex of dynamic physical processes transpiring in an unevenly developed totality—so uneven as not to comprise a recognizable whole.<sup>18</sup> Take, for example, the following remark in the *Grundrisse*, where Marx says: "The historic process was the divorce of elements which up until then were bound together; its result is therefore not that one of the elements disappears, but that each of them appears in a negative relation to the other—the (potentially) free worker on the one side, capital (potentially) on the other."<sup>19</sup> This is a lovely passage, which is strangely macaronic in its language, drawing from the disciplines of history and, as I will soon argue, *Naturphilosophie*. Marx is here trying to show how these historical processes of dissolution/resolution must be understood in strictly materialist terms—and that the *what* of "materialist" history resides at both the macro level of modes of production transforming into others (what we've always known) and at the micro or *elemental* level (what has not been understood). His use of the word "elements"—or, in the German, "*Elemente*"—is revealing in this respect, and this term is, not surprisingly, our second piece of vocabulary to go along with "*aufösung*" or dissolution/resolution. With these two terms, *Elemente* and *aufösung*, Marx describes the constituent parts or "elements" in society that were once "bound together" but which, even after having been broken apart, remain as elements: "not . . . one of the elements disappears," he says.

We already have enough to see what makes this mode of dialectical thinking and writing about history a form of dialectical materialism: what is canceled or "raised" in the dialectical transition is simply what is translated or brought over, in reconstituted material form, to the new formation—in this case, from feudalism to capitalism. This is materialism—or materialist thinking—because we are not dealing with the usual abstraction and universalization in the dialectical transition (which become concretized and individualized once more, in the turns of the dialectic). Rather, we are regarding the process of transition itself

as an elemental re-formation that produces a new material basis, a new material condition.

It has to be said, by way of pause, that these elements are strange things, because they are relations that are broken apart—the old relations dissolved but not yet composed into the new relations that would give you capitalist relations of production. Elements aren't conceptually simple, though they do smack of mereology or what philosophers call unextended simples. When, for example, elements are subject to *Auflösungsprozessen*, they are continually in motion, constantly becoming. So how are we to get a conceptual fix on these strange elements?

Marx helps us a bit in one of his earliest writings, his dissertation on materialism entitled “The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature.” In this work, Marx asserts two things in particular that are relevant to our considerations. First, if we are going to speak of mereology, we have to know that Marx distinguishes atoms from elements, and this is crucial insofar as we aren't to reduce this philosophical materialism to the bourgeois kind identified (rightly) by Jameson. What Marx says of atoms is to be expected, given that his interest doesn't really lie in them. He says that an atom negates its relation to everything but itself.<sup>20</sup> It negates its relation to other atoms and to the straight line from which it swerves as it falls. By this swerve, chance is expressed in the natural order; this is also how the purported freedom of the atom is realized, and—preposterously—this is how its self-consciousness is manifested, as what Marx calls the “first form of self-consciousness.”<sup>21</sup> To swerve is to be self-aware.

Second, and this is the better point, he states that an atom is an element or “*stoicheion*,” meaning that the atom is not reducible to matter or, for that matter, to itself. We cannot even think “the atom as it exists in the void.” As an element or *stoicheion*, however, the atom is thinkable because it is the “basis of appearance.”<sup>22</sup> It is not nothing. True, the atom on its own is an abstraction—indeed, even nothingness, so lacking as it is of extension—yet the element is thinkable and, eventually, seeable, the basis of all appearances. It is *something*. An atom is not bound in or by relations, whereas an element is caught up in them. Marx thus prioritizes the element over the atom; this is why he says that the element is “the substance of nature, out of which everything emerges, into which everything dissolves.”<sup>23</sup> When Marx posits the element rather than the unthinkable atom as the substance of nature, he first constructs a materialism—a materialism that is at once a phenomenology involving the study of appearances and, for that reason, also an idealism, as inevitably all this talk and thought about matter must be. Second, he formulates a materialism that can account for the link between substance and self, matter and mind: a

materialism, in other words, that can include consciousness all the way down to a limit point in substance itself and all the way up to that other limit, the substance we call totality.

Owing to its Hegelian origins, then, this elemental materialism involves an unusual Subject. It isn't an identity. It isn't a transcendental jug of faculties. It isn't an apparatus, or a *träger*, or whatever we take Marx to mean—really and deeply—by that term. It's not a subject (now switching to lowercase) susceptible to the hard problem of subjectivity or consciousness, such that we wonder whether matter is the basis for ideas or, in another guise, fret about the base barking orders at the superstructure. It is in avoidance of these reductionist versions of the subject that Hegel won't even use the word to speak of the phenomenological observer; likewise, his choice term for the various modes and motions of thought, "*Subjektivität*," can just as well apply to what goes by the name of "*Objektivität*"—each itself the "one-sidedness" of what is a more complete dialectic. The famous transition from substance to subject, which Hegel describes in several works, is great and all, but it puts us in mind of something to which the word "subject" can even be applied, and this naming in turn tricks us into asking the old materialist question of how such a subject emerges from matter (which is not substance!) or from anything else when in fact—by the reckoning of Hegel's various expositions—the issue just as much concerns the subject's ceaseless dissolutions and endings, its own *Auflösungsprozessen*. The Hegelian subject is always at risk of teetering over the edge back into substance, back into the flow of appearances and the flux of relations that make the subject completely contingent in the first place—contingent because it's always historically specific as this or that epochal form of consciousness whose only constant is the dialectic.<sup>24</sup>

### Naturally Hegel

Back on track. Let's remember that this is still a relatively "young Marx," who thought intensely within Hegel's conceptual scheme, to the point of giving him headaches, as he once confessed in a touching letter to his father in 1837, when he complained about the "grotesque craggy melody of [Hegel] which did not appeal to me. Once more I wanted to dive into the sea, but with the definite intention of establishing that the nature of the mind is just as necessary, concrete and firmly based as the nature of the body."<sup>25</sup> But Marx continued to read Hegel, if for no other reason than that everyone else did. And in Hegel he found the cure for his Hegelian headaches.



What Marx took from Hegel is an elemental materialism that, as I will show in the next section, enabled Hegel himself to draw together natural philosophy and political theory, philosophical materialism and historical materialism, in a way that is uncannily a dialectical materialism. Marx saw what Hegel could do with this materialism, as did Engels. So we would do well to look a bit more closely at Hegelian materialism, especially its instantiation in Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*, from which we can derive a few key points about the elements. In this work, Hegel speaks initially and concretely of the four elements as presented by Empedocles—fire, earth, air, water—but quickly begins to explain their deeper significance by discussing not only elemental relations and processes, but also the knowability of the elements themselves.<sup>26</sup> For example, Hegel establishes that “elements” are only knowable when they are in a relation to something else, and that when they are not in a relation they are pure abstractions: “it cannot be said what the Elements in their universal manifestations are, but only what they are in relation to particular objects. If one asks: What does heat do? the answer is given that it expands; but it likewise also contracts. It is impossible to indicate a universal manifestation to which there are no exceptions: with some bodies one thing results, with other bodies another.” So, to think of an element is to think immediately of an object to which the element is related. To think of an element is at once to think of a relation. To sever the element from the relation is to dally with what Hegel calls “abstract determinatenesses” that are “still lacking in subjectivity-status; consequently, what is true of them is not yet true of subjectivized matter.”<sup>27</sup> Such an “abstract determinateness” is, basically, the atom, which is not given to appearances and is unavailable to perception.<sup>28</sup> One can say, in other words, that “elements” help one think concretely rather than impossibly abstractly.

Of course, elements can stand in relation to other elements in order to compose other entities or elements. It is here that Hegel's talk of elemental relations takes up the familiar language of “dissolution” as a key feature of what he calls the “elemental” process—and “dissolution,” as we have already seen, is precisely the term Marx uses in his own historical materialism, which is attentive to assorted *Auflösungsprozessen* (dissolution/resolution processes). For his part, Hegel says some fairly mythographic things when he reflects on these processes while construing the earth as an “elemental totality”: “Air as atmosphere, Water as the sea, but Fire as a terrestrial Element contained in the fructified, dissolved [*aufgelösten*] earth”—*aufgelösten* being the operative term here.<sup>29</sup> Hegel speaks of these elements in relations that are defined by dissolution itself, as when “the atmosphere is the earth in its state of dissolution, of pure tension, the relation of gravity and heat.”<sup>30</sup> He tells of the “sea

itself” as a “higher vitality [*Lebendigkeit*] than the air” that is “the subject of bitterness and neutrality and dissolution—a living process which is always on the point of breaking forth into life.”<sup>31</sup> He says that in the sea “millions of rudimentary lives [i.e., ‘a host of luminous species’ that give off ‘phosphorescent light’] rapidly drift away to be dissolved again in the watery element.”<sup>32</sup> Where there are elements, there are dissolutions. Where there are elements, there are forces and life forces, processes and life processes, potentialities blooming into actualities and back into potentialities via dissolution.<sup>33</sup>

It stands to reason, then, that if an element is said to be at the center of this fundamental dynamic of the natural world (its *Lebendigkeit* or vitality), Hegel will designate the element as a feature of his famous dialectic—that preeminent figure for dynamic relationality. Hegel writes: “The individual identity which binds together the different Elements, as well as their difference from one another and from their unity, is a dialectic which constitutes the physical life of the Earth.”<sup>34</sup> It makes additional sense that Hegel would posit “dissolution” as a mode of dialectical transition—the very process by which an element loosens and then loses its identity to become something else, as when “water is transformed into air and vanishes,” or when “water evaporates, the form of vapour vanishes altogether.”<sup>35</sup> Here, dissolution marks not the demarcations between all that is, but rather a moment of contact between entities as physical states—the intermediate modes of being in the gray zones of becoming.<sup>36</sup> Throughout the *Philosophy of Nature*, the language of the elements is at points indistinguishable from the language of dialectics, so much so that the “element” is the Hegelian “moment.”<sup>37</sup> Here, the element is less an abstraction from matter than an attempt to draw together thought and element, thought and matter, in a philosophical position that is attentive to the *mind*ing of matter.

And this is exactly the problem that Hegel sustains in, of all places, his political philosophy, showing us that the materialism within a philosophy of nature can also work as a materialism for political theory, yielding more of those macaronic passages that (as we saw in Marx) combine natural philosophy with political philosophy. In the *Philosophy of Right*, for example, Hegel construes elements to be various. An element can be a political category like the Estates (*ständischen*), which represents a class of persons and prevents them from busting apart into either “a mere indiscriminate multitude” or “an aggregate dispersed into its atoms,” which would amount to no society at all.<sup>38</sup> He goes on to say that the Estates are “the fluctuating element in civil society,” a point of emphasis that helps us understand that “society is not dispersed into atomic units, collected to perform only a single and temporary act, and kept together

for a moment and no longer.”<sup>39</sup> That is, an element isn’t only a collection of atomic units—people aren’t atoms—nor does the element simply dissolve back into atoms where it can’t maintain its identity as an element. It is for this reason that Hegel—in the same way that he expresses skepticism in the *Philosophy of Nature* that our understanding can divide an inherently unified nature, or that thought can “exhaust” all the properties of an element—here cautions against atomistic political analysis, saying, “This atomistic and abstract point of view vanishes” at a certain moment in the historical process.<sup>40</sup> For Hegel, water is more than  $H_2O$ , more than the sum of its parts or even properties.<sup>41</sup> Suffice it to say that this mode of analysis extends to yet other of Hegel’s works, like his *Philosophy of History*, where he vividly literalizes this idea of a political body dissolving into its atomic units (i.e., into nothing) at the peril of social relations writ large (*in die Einzelnen atomistisch*): “when the physical body suffers dissolution, each point gains a life of its own, but which is only the miserable life of worms; so the political organism is here dissolved into atoms—viz., private persons,” for which one has no use.<sup>42</sup>

This is enough, I hope, to make the basic point of this chapter, which is that Hegel is materialist, espousing an elemental materialism—whether we want to name it a Feuerbachian contemplative materialism *avant la lettre*, or a practical materialism. It is an elemental materialism that most visibly conjoins his natural and political philosophy and opens up for us a new way of reading Hegel—his anti-atomist idiom of elements, their dissolutions, relations, and dialectics—whereby we recognize the materialist substructure of his idealism. But this is not, of course, only about Hegel. This is about Marx, too, and his own materialism, which also borrows that distinct Hegelian idiom of the elements, their dissolutions, their relations, and their dialectics within the anti-atomist frame. I argue that Marx follows Hegel right at the point where he is supposed to have rejected him: at the formation of his revolutionary historical materialism. That is, Marx uses this Hegelian elemental materialism in both his early and late works, across the very epistemological break that Althusser and his students identified as distinguishing the young Marx from the mature Marx, the Hegelian Marx from the properly conceptual Marxian Marx. I’ll now argue that Hegel is the materialist substructure of Marx’s thinking, which was no surprise to Marx, even if he never admitted as much.

## Elementary Marx

So let’s cross the divide, not only between Hegel and Marx, but between Marx and Marx, the younger, Hegelian Marx and the older, anti-Hegelian

Marx. We resume our discussion of the *Grundrisse* where Marx talks about “the divorce of elements” in history—elements that are dissolved but ready to recombine into a new formation in the transition from feudalism to capitalism.<sup>43</sup> Marx speaks of historical, cultural, and economic “elements” in just this way in numerous places in the *Grundrisse*, some forty-six times—most often of elements that are on the verge of transition (as potentials), passing through a phase of dissolution to recombine themselves with other elements. For example, he writes about a certain tendency whereby “the free, unobstructed, progressive and universal development of the forces of production is itself the presupposition of society.” He elaborates: “This tendency—which capital possesses, but which at the same time, since capital is a limited form of production, contradicts it and hence drives it towards dissolution—distinguishes capital from all earlier modes of production, and at the same time contains this element, that capital is posited as a mere point of transition.”<sup>44</sup> The element, in other words, is capital on the “mere point” of transition, something that is not yet what it is—a becoming, a potential. This potential characterizes what Marx already calls “free . . . development”—a question of freedom to which I’ll return in my conclusion. For Marx, as for Hegel, the element is itself the dialectical transition, the dynamic of the historical process.

More broadly speaking, this is the *elemental materialism* of the materialist vision of history that comprises the *Grundrisse*, whereby the decomposed elements or quantities combine into a new quality that is the new situation, the new mode of production, the new forms of relation, and the new concentrations of labor and accumulations of capital. This version of *materialist* history finds expression elsewhere in Marx, including the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 (of all places!)<sup>45</sup> as well as his grand work of 1867, *Capital*. Of course, this latter text is said to indicate Marx’s break from Hegel, but if this is so, Marx did not break from the elemental materialism that he learned from Hegel. Writing on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Marx in *Capital* states: “The economic structure of capitalist society has grown out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of the latter set free the elements of the former.”<sup>46</sup> Marx never tired of talking about these dissolutions, freedoms, and swerves in the historical process. In his chapter on “Machinery and Large Scale Industry,” he writes, “The solid crystallization of a hierarchy of specialized processes, which arose from the old division of labour, ceases to exist; it is dissolved, and makes way for constant changes. Quite apart from this, a fundamental transformation takes place in the composition of the collective labourer or, in other words, the combined working personnel.”<sup>47</sup> Crystallization, dissolution, combination, and constant change: it’s all there, everywhere, in *Capital*. Indeed, it is out of these

centers of meaning that Marx's historical vocabulary flows in *Capital*, in which he talks about workers "repelled and attracted" to factories, the "breaking-up" of handicrafts into "*membra disjecta*," the "combined industries" out of "numerous isolated small industries," the "combination of the social processes of production," the "social combinations of the labour process" that nonetheless "reproduces the old division of labour with its ossified particularities," the "scattered handicrafts," the "accelerated accumulation" of profit, the concentration of machines, of capital, of the means of production, and of people, who are "the historical motive power of society."<sup>48</sup>

It has been claimed that the elements and matter have "little to do with historical materialism as an approach to social and political analysis."<sup>49</sup> This obviously isn't true. Nor is it right to think of decomposition and dissolution, as did Jacques Rancière, as simply a proletarian "taste" for fine bourgeois things—the hope here being that the penchant for luxury goods will trickle down to the masses once the values associated with any particular class are free to circulate.<sup>50</sup> But that readers of Marx could make these points shows you how far the question of *historical* materialism has gotten from the problems of *philosophical* and *dialectical* materialism, which in one sense is obviously the point—these two things are not the same—but which, from another point of view, isn't a necessary distinction in all cases. They don't have to be entirely different. What I am identifying here are the methods, terms, and observations of a historical materialism that doubles as the dialectical materialism it was inevitably to become. Bluntly, it's a philosophy of history combined with a philosophy of nature that is only viable—and that doesn't get bogged down in positivism or scientism—precisely because the dialectic conjoins and subtends both disciplines.<sup>51</sup>

## Dialectical Materialism

I should say something about Marx's great collaborator, Engels, who recovers dialectics as the law of nature. In his infamous *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels gets his argument going by blaming Hegel for getting everything backwards: "the universe, willy-nilly, has to conform to a system of thought which itself is only the product of a definite stage of development of human thought." Engels elaborates by echoing Marx's famous statement about turning Hegel on his head: "If we turn the [Hegelian] thing around, then everything becomes simple, and the dialectical laws that look so extremely mysterious in idealist philosophy at once become

simple and clear as noonday.” Hegel never spoke of dialectical laws like this, and Engels himself admits that he “reduced” Hegel’s ideas to the basic three laws of dialectical thought: one, “the law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa”; two, “the law of the interpenetration of opposites”; and three, “the law of the negation of the negation.”<sup>52</sup>

So here we have Engels talking about an inversion of the Hegelian dialectic so that—as the thinking goes—we can reductively and redundantly frame our experiences of nature by the laws we ourselves write to describe unseen natural processes—processes that are said, in their totality, to instantiate the three laws of the dialectic. This has to be about the most perverse appropriation of Hegel possible, using his own motif of inversion to say: first, that you, Hegel, ignored materiality, and second, that you, Hegel, had nothing to say about laws, nothing to offer on the relation between experimental science and dialectics. Let’s remember that Hegel’s point in his philosophy was to sustain a material emphasis irreducible to the symbolic languages or laws of chemistry or physics—which is why the *Phenomenology of Spirit* begins in the empirical, in “sense certainty,” where objects appear whose qualities seem to shift as they elude understanding and description. From there, this text courses us through chapters on “Perception: or the Thing and Deception” and “Force and the Understanding”—two object lessons about the world exceeding description—before dropping us off at the chapter on the lord and the bondsman, the marquee material struggle in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>53</sup> Hegel speaks of elements, compositions, and dissolutions so subtly throughout the *Phenomenology* that no one seems to have noticed how this language of natural philosophy is dispersed all throughout it, all the while waving out of court the various sciences whose *end* is measurement, like phrenology. This is the reason why no one has ever charged Hegel with scientism or positivism (and let’s remember that Hegelianism has, historically, been the antidote to positivism).<sup>54</sup> This is also why Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* has to be a key text in considerations about scientific determinism, because it is there that he tells us (as if to anticipate a disagreement with Engels) that the elements follow no laws and in fact shun the laws of necessity. For Hegel, rather, the elements express the contingency of what he calls “the free life of Nature.”<sup>55</sup> If Engels intended to reduce both the world and dialectics to laws, he didn’t seem to care much for Hegel’s cautions about the difficulties of that enterprise. Which is why, to be frank, more people read Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* than they do Engels’s *Dialectics of Nature*.

Marx, for his part, read Hegel so closely as to absorb wholesale Hegel’s materialist idiom, but he was too close to notice this borrowing,

too inside this kind of Hegelianism to be able to get outside it. He only got some distance from Hegel by quibbling with his predecessor about whether the dialectic should be turned this way or that, when the truth is, no matter which way you turn the dialectic, it's always going to turn back. Like some prank toy from the old Spencer's gift shop in a moribund mall, it keeps on flipping. Indeed, when Marx and Engels focus on the dialectic as their point of disagreement with Hegel, they neglect to mention that what makes their thinking a philosophy, what makes it a philosophical materialism and a dialectical materialism attentive to natural and cultural processes alike, is that Hegel had already produced an entire dialectical idiom and method from within natural philosophy, from within the frame of the empirical, and—of course—within the post-Kantian context in which “nature philosophy” really took off with Fichte, Schelling, and others. Engels, in other words, didn't need to develop a dialectical materialism in some effort to direct dialectics to a new, natural domain. Hegel had already done it. This is why, too, Marx will always be the better student of Hegel. For he wisely adopted from Hegel this talk of “elements” and thus didn't need to develop a dialectics of nature (more like a dialectics *with* nature). In this sense, Korsch is mostly right when he says that “Marx and Engels were dialecticians before they were materialists,” but this is true only in the sense that their dialectical habits of mind, which they inherited from Hegel, already included materialism.<sup>56</sup> It's better to say, then, that Marx and Engels were materialists as soon as they were dialecticians—with thanks to Hegel, who said, as we recall in my first epigraph: “I do rate what is concrete higher than what is abstract, and an animality that develops into no more than a slime, higher than the starry host.”<sup>57</sup>

## Notes

Portions of this chapter originally appeared in Slovene in my essay “Dialektična filozofija: O fetišizmu in materializmu pri Heglu in Marxu” (“Dialectical Philosophy: On Fetishism and Materialism in Hegel and Marx”), trans. Samo Tomšič, *Problemi* 52, no. 3–4 (2014): 81–105. The remainder was presented as various lectures at University of Ljubljana (2013), Johns Hopkins University (2014), University of Tennessee–Knoxville (2014), Purdue University (2014), University of Pennsylvania (2015), and Duquesne University (2016).

1. See Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday (New York: Verso, 2012); and Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2014). I quite like Gajo Petrović's formulation of this problem: “A definitive abolition of philosophy is imaginable only as a definitive victory of blind economic forces or political violence. Thus, it is unimaginable.” Petrović,

*Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century: A Yugoslav Philosopher Considers Karl Marx's Writings* (New York: Anchor, 1967), 55. For Marx and Engels, "When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 48.

2. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 145.

3. Karl Marx, *The General Council of the First International*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress, 1962), 36. So much, then, for Marx's claim, made with Engels, that "philosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as masturbation and sexual love." Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 103.

4. Hegel generously cites research from the experimental sciences but does not always name his adversaries. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature: Part Two of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 116–17, 120, 140, 167, 235–36, 253–54. Yet he acknowledges the differences between "conditioned" laboratory settings and "free" natural circumstances (116). On the four elements he writes: "the conception of the four Elements which has been general since the time of Empedocles . . . is nowadays rejected as a childish belief" (106). Hegel does notably use Empedoclean metaphors in the "Preface" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (§26), but it is not accurate to say, with Nikolai Bukharin, that "in protest against atomic theory, chemical elements, and so on (he himself understood 'elements' in the spirit of the ancient Greeks, especially Empedocles, that is, as earth, water, air, and fire), and from fear of materialism he overstepped the mark, bending the stick, in the direction of the absolutization (that is, metaphysical restriction) of the whole, divorcing the whole from its parts." Nikolai Bukharin, *Philosophical Arabesques* (New York: Monthly Review, 2005), 203–4; see also 206.

5. "An intelligent idealism is closer to an intelligent materialism than is a stupid materialism." Vladimir Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 38 (Moscow: Progress, 1972), 276.

6. See Georgi Plekhanov, "For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel's Death," in *Selected Philosophical Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress, 1974), 421. For the thesis that "dialectical materialism is the only true philosophical inheritor of what Hegel designates as the speculative attitude of the thought towards objectivity," whereby "all other forms of materialism, including the late Althusser's 'materialism of the encounter,' scientific naturalism, and neo-Deleuzian 'New Materialism,' fail in this goal," see Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2014), 4.

7. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 465.

8. Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Peking: Foreign Languages, 1975), 23–24.

9. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 58.

10. From *The German Ideology*: "It shows that history . . . is . . . a material



result: a sum of productive forces, an historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor; a mass of productive forces, capital funds and conditions, which, on the one hand, is indeed modified by the new generation, but also on the other prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definite development, a special character. It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances" (59).

11. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 45–46.

12. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nickolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993), 496.

13. *Ibid.*, 502.

14. *Ibid.*, 497.

15. *Ibid.*, 498.

16. *Ibid.*, 502.

17. *Ibid.*, 498.

18. Marx explains how "dissolution" amounts to "negation" ("This historic situation is thus first of all negated as a full property relation") or that "negation" is another way of thinking about "dissolution": "This is historic state No. I, which is negated in this relation or presupposed as historically dissolved." It is as if Marx wants to incorporate his historical thesis into a general kind of Hegelianism, as befits the general thrust of the *Grundrisse*. And, of course, "historic state No. I" encounters historic state "No. II, which by its nature can exist only as antithesis to or, if one will, at the same time as complement of a modified form of the first—likewise negated [*negiert*] in the first formula of capital." Marx, *Grundrisse*, 498–99, 499–500.

19. *Ibid.*, 503.

20. Karl Marx, "The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature," in *The First Writings of Karl Marx*, ed. Paul M. Schafer (New York: Ig, 2006), 117.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 131.

23. *Ibid.*, 130.

24. What I say here identifies the strength of Hegel's theory of the subject. Yet Marx says something similar to point out its weakness—namely, that in Hegel the subject always lapses back into its predicate and is simply a function of it. For Marx, the predicate is analogous to substance. See Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*," in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1987).

25. Karl Marx, "Letter from Marx to His Father," in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 18.

26. For example, elements are "determinations of the elemental totality which have an immediate existence as free, independent bodies"—they are, in short, "*physical Elements*," the very compounds that constitute the world of appearance. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 105.

27. Ibid., 115.

28. To put it differently, even if datedly: “the atom is itself a thought, and so the interpretation of matter as consisting of atoms is a metaphysical one.” G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1991), 156.

29. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 294.

30. Ibid., 295.

31. Ibid., 296.

32. Ibid., 297.

33. “Here can be seen the true meaning of *powers* [*Potenzen*]. The non-organic Elements are powers opposed to what is individual, subjective—the non-organic destroys the organic.” Ibid., 27.

34. Ibid., 113.

35. Ibid., 116.

36. Hegel makes a similar point in his *Philosophy of History*, stating: “But for spirit, the highest attainment is self-knowledge; an advance not only to the *intuition*, but to the *thought*—the clear conception of itself. This it must and is also destined to accomplish; but the accomplishment is at the same time its dissolution, and the rise of another spirit, another world-historical people, another epoch of Universal History. This transition and connection lead us to the connection of the whole—the idea of the World’s History as such”; and “change, while it imports dissolution, involves at the same time the rise of a *new life*—that while death is the issue of life, life is also the issue of death.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1956), 71–72, 72–73.

37. “If we now take these up in forms which are familiar to us, and say that we want to approach Nature as thinkers, there are, in the first place, other ways of approaching Nature which I will mention, not for the sake of completeness, but because we shall find in them the elements or moments which are requisite for a knowledge of the Idea and which individually reach our consciousness earlier in other *ways of considering Nature*.” Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 4.

38. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 198.

39. Ibid., 200.

40. Ibid., 198.

41. As Hegel claims, the element water is always more than a “*compositum*” of hydrogen and oxygen atoms, and thus cannot be divided into such units. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 117.

42. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 317. See also the following passage from the *Encyclopaedia Logic*: “In modern times, the atomistic view has become even more important in the *political* [realm] than in the physical [one]. According to this view, the will of the *single* [individuals] as such is the principle of the State; what produces the attraction is the particularity of needs [and] inclinations; and the universal, the State itself, is the external relationship of a contract” (155–56).

43. As Marx says, on the one side “the (potentially) free workers,” and on

the other side “capital (potentially).” When these two potentials become actuality by entering into a relation with one another, then you have a composition that contributes to the emergence or *appearance* of capitalism. You have a relation that is at once a compound: “at the same time . . . the development of exchange and of exchange value . . . brings with it both the dissolution of *labour’s relations of property in its conditions of existence*, in one respect, and at the same time the dissolution of *labour* which is itself *classed as one of the objective conditions of production*.” Marx, *Grundrisse*, 509.

44. *Ibid.*, 540.

45. “The dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 489. To be sure, there are plenty of other kinds of thinking in the *Manifesto*—talk of archaic forms “pushed into the background” (475) or “swept away” (476), talk of new forms springing forth (474)—all of which are a more inelegant way of conceptualizing a dialectical and materialist transition. Yet there remains in this tract a distinct indication that when material conditions reach a point of “dissolution,” then the proletariat steps forth to administer the coup de grâce (see 481; 472) and “abolish” all the “existing property relations,” specifically “the abolition of bourgeois property” or, emphatically, because it bears repeating, the “abolition of private property” (484). It is here that one can see that “dissolution” takes on a new transitivity, a new verbal, political, and material force in “abolition,” acts of destruction.

46. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 875.

47. *Ibid.*, 590.

48. *Ibid.*, 583, 616, 600, 635, 638, 617, 601, 578, 637.

49. Jason Edwards, “The Materialism of Historical Materialism,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 281.

50. See Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster, and Andrew Parke (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 58, 107. Rancière is closer to the mark in speaking of decomposition, “which pushes classes toward their death,” and bad decomposition, which “causes classes to fall short of themselves” (96).

51. Still, any talk of elements is going to get you into trouble in certain critical company, and has for a long time. You could be blamed for having investments in “scientism” in the manner of Ernst Mach, whom Vladimir Lenin couldn’t stand. Of the “elements,” for example, Lenin says: “Machism, which is a species of muddled idealism, befores the issue and side-tracks it by means of the futile verbal trick, ‘element.’” V. I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*, trans. Abraham Fineberg, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 14, ed. Clemens Dutt (Moscow: Progress, 1962), 46.

52. Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 25 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 356.

53. Hegel, in his lord/bondsman dialectic, depicts the contemporary mate-

rial conditions of feudalism or *Grundherrschaft*, in which the struggle for recognition and possession transpires, as I show in *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 65–85.

54. Compare Gramsci (whose points about Marx’s idealism I don’t accept, and whose ideas about Bukharin are incomplete): “That Marx should have introduced positivist elements into his work is hardly surprising, and it is easily explained: Marx was not a philosopher by profession, and even he had his off days.” Antonio Gramsci, *Pre-Prison Writings*, ed. Richard Bellamy, trans. Virginia Cox (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 77–78.

55. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 115.

56. Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 76. I need to elaborate here more generously on Engels’s meaning. In his letter to H. Starkenburg (dated January 25, 1894) he speaks of the “accidents” of history and a certain “zigzag” that nonetheless follows a course parallel to “economic development.” Is this the “swerve” of history? Perhaps more on point, Engels, in a letter to Joseph Bloch (dated September 21–22, 1890), devotes an entire paragraph to elemental materialism. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 768, 760.

57. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 297. Engels did get one thing right, however (he got many things right, of course, but this one in particular, which few today seem to acknowledge): he knew that German Idealism was responsible for saving the materialism of the Enlightenment.

# Intellectual Intuition and *Intellectus Archetypus*: Reflexivity from Kant to Hegel

Slavoj Žižek

Philosophically, the “woman question” (to use this old, totally inappropriate designation) is resolvable neither through a new symbolization of femininity nor through the elevation of woman into an entity which resists symbolization, into the “indivisible remainder” of the process of symbolization. This second path was taken by Schelling, who “knew that one cannot derive an expression like ‘woman’ from principles. What cannot be derived one should narrate.”<sup>1</sup> Schelling’s break out of the logical structure of reality (which can be presented as a notional system) into the Real of primordial drives (where there is no deduction, one can only tell a story)—that is, his move from logos to mythos—is thus also an assertion of the Feminine. Schelling extrapolated this line of thought to its extreme: his premise (or, rather, the premise that Peter Sloterdijk imputes to him) is that the female orgasm, this most ecstatic moment of sexual pleasure (as the ancient Greeks already knew), is the high point of human evolution. Sloterdijk even claims that its experience plays the role of providing the ontological proof of God: in it, we humans come in contact with the Absolute. Schelling tried to break out of the idealist closed circle, bringing in matter, organism, life, development, so he was attentive not only to the pure logical mind but also to what goes on in the bodily sphere, sexuality, with human evolution: bliss is not just the Aristotelian thought thinking itself, but also a body enjoying itself to the almost unbearable maximum.<sup>2</sup>

If, then, the female orgasm functions as a new version of the ontological proof of God, as a new version of the One, what would have been the Hegelian answer to this thesis? To arrive at it, it suffices to imagine the paradigmatic hard-core sexual position (and shot): the woman is lying on her back with her legs spread wide backwards and her knees above her shoulders; the camera is in front, showing the man’s penis penetrating

her vagina (the man's face is as a rule invisible, he is reduced to an instrument); but what we see in the background between her thighs is her face in the thrall of orgasmic enjoyment. This minimal "reflexivity" is crucial: if we were to see just the close-up of penetration, the scene would soon turn boring, disgusting even, more of a medical showcase; one has to add the woman's enthralled gaze, the subjective reaction to what is going on. Furthermore, this gaze is as a rule not directed at her partner but at us viewers, confirming to us her enjoyment: we spectators clearly play the role of the big Other who has to register her enjoyment. The pivot of the scene is thus not male enjoyment (her sexual partner's or the spectator's); on the contrary, the spectator is reduced to a pure gaze. The pivot is woman's enjoyment (staged for the male gaze, of course).

This elementary hard-core scene renders perfectly the minimal reflexivity that cuts from within every immediate orgasmic One. The task of the present chapter is to follow this notion of reflexivity as articulated by the German Idealists, especially Kant and Hegel. In German Idealism, the concept of subjectivity is torn between two extremes: subjectivity as the immediate unity of "intellectual intuition" (the free flow of direct self-awareness in which freedom and necessity, activity and passivity, coincide), and subjectivity as reflexivity (the power of distance, mediation, tearing apart). The first section of this chapter will trace the role that intellectual intuition plays throughout the German Idealist tradition, from Kant, who rejects it as inaccessible to us finite humans, through Fichte and Schelling, the latter of whom asserts it as "the highest organon of philosophy," to Hegel, who overcomes this tension by way of asserting reflexivity itself as the absolute power. The second section will look more closely at this crucial difference between Kant and Hegel regarding the question of reflexivity; it will do so by focusing on Kant's notion of "*intellectus archetypus*" and Hegel's critique of Kant's use of this notion.

## Intellectual Intuition from Kant to Hegel

Let's begin with the concept of "intellectual intuition" (*intellektuelle Anschauung*), the free flow of direct self-awareness in which freedom and necessity, activity and passivity, collide. Intellectual intuition is impossible within the space of Kant's thought because Kant's notion of the transcendental "I" relies on a certain gap (from the Real) which is precisely closed in the experience of intellectual intuition. As he defines it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the transcendental subject is nothing but

the simple, and in itself completely empty, representation “I”; and we cannot even say that it is a concept, but only that it is a bare consciousness which accompanies all concepts. Through this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of the thoughts = X. It is known only through the thoughts which are its predicates, and of it, apart from them, we cannot have any concept whatsoever, but can only revolve in a perpetual circle, since any judgment upon it has always already made use of its representation. And the reason why this inconvenience is inseparably bound up with it, is that consciousness in itself is not a representation distinguishing a particular object, but a form of representation in general, that is, of representation in so far as it is to be entitled knowledge; for it is only of knowledge that I can say that I am thereby thinking something.<sup>3</sup>

We have to be very attentive in reading these lines. What Kant is saying here is that a radical gap is constitutive of the “I,” a gap that separates the “I” (transcendental subject) from its noumenal support (“this I or he or it . . . which thinks”): “this inconvenience is inseparably bound up with it,” since the “I” exists only as ex-sisting, at a distance from the “thing” that it is. Or, in terms of cognition, whereas we can know objects in reality phenomenally (despite the fact that their In-itself remains inaccessible to us), our Self is unknowable to us phenomenally because (on account of its self-identity, its identity with “myself”) knowing it even phenomenally would equal knowing it noumenally. And here things get really complex: this gap that constitutively separates the “I” from its noumenal support also determines the very status of the “I” as practico-ethical. If intellectual intuition were to be possible, the innermost act of the “I” would be contemplative: achieving the ultimate identity of subject and object, of thinking and being.

Kant is here opposed to Spinoza; his thesis is that the Spinozian position of knowledge without the “deontological” dimension of an unconditional “Ought” is impossible to sustain: there is an irreducible crack in the edifice of Being, and it is through this crack that the deontological dimension of Ought intervenes—the “Ought” fills in the incompleteness of “Is,” of Being. When Kant says that he reduced the domain of knowledge in order to make space for religious faith, he is to be taken quite literally, in a radically anti-Spinozist way: from the Kantian perspective, Spinoza’s position appears as a nightmarish vision of subjects reduced to marionettes. What, exactly, does a marionette stand for as a subjective stance? In Kant, we find the term “marionette” in a mysterious subchapter of his *Critique of Practical Reason* entitled “Of the Wise Adaptation of Man’s Cognitive Faculties to His Practical Vocation,” in which he en-

deavors to answer the question of what would happen to us if we were to gain access to the noumenal domain, to the *Ding an sich*:

Instead of the conflict which now the moral disposition has to wage with inclinations and in which, after some defeats, moral strength of mind may be gradually won, God and eternity in their awful majesty would stand unceasingly before our eyes. . . . Thus most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, none from duty. The moral worth of actions, on which alone the worth of the person and even of the world depends in the eyes of supreme wisdom, would not exist at all. The conduct of man, so long as his nature remained as it is now, would be changed into mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would gesticulate well but no life would be found in the figures.<sup>4</sup>

So, for Kant, direct access to the noumenal domain would deprive us of the very “spontaneity” which forms the kernel of transcendental freedom: it would turn us into lifeless automata, or, to put it in today’s terms, into “thinking machines.” The implication of this passage is much more radical and paradoxical than it may appear. If we discard its inconsistency (how could fear and lifeless gesticulation coexist?), the conclusion it imposes is that, at the level of phenomena as well as noumena, we humans are a “mere mechanism” with no autonomy and freedom: as phenomena we are not free, we are a part of nature, a “mere mechanism” totally submitted to causal links, a part of the nexus of causes and effects, and as noumena we are again not free but reduced to a “mere mechanism.” (Is what Kant describes as a person who directly knows the noumenal domain not strictly homologous to the utilitarian subject whose acts are fully determined by the calculus of pleasures and pains?) *Our freedom persists only in a space in between the phenomenal and the noumenal.* It is therefore not that Kant simply limited causality to the phenomenal domain in order to be able to assert that, at the noumenal level, we are free, autonomous agents; Kant’s point is that we are only free insofar as our horizon is that of the phenomenal, insofar as the noumenal domain remains inaccessible to us. What we encounter here is again the tension between the two notions of the Real, the Real of the inaccessible noumenal Thing and the Real as the pure gap, the interstice between the repetition of the same: the Kantian Real is the noumenal Thing beyond phenomena, while the Hegelian Real is the gap itself between the phenomenal and the noumenal, the gap which sustains freedom.<sup>5</sup>

Is the way out of this predicament to assert that we are free insofar as we are noumenally autonomous, but our cognitive perspective remains



constrained to the phenomenal level? In this case, we *are* “really free” at the noumenal level, but our freedom would be meaningless if we were also to have cognitive insight into the noumenal domain, since that insight would always determine our choices. (Who would choose evil when confronted with the fact that the price of doing evil will be divine punishment?) However, does this imagined case not provide us with the only consequent answer to the question “what would a truly free act be,” a free act for a noumenal entity, an act of true *noumenal* freedom? It would be to *know* all the inexorable horrible consequences of choosing the evil *and nonetheless to choose it*. This would have been a truly “non-pathological” act, an act committed with no regard for one’s pathological interests.<sup>6</sup>

The basic gesture of Kant’s transcendental turn is thus to invert the obstacle into a positive condition. In the standard Leibnizean ontology, we finite subjects can act freely *in spite of* our finitude, since freedom is the spark which unites us with the infinite God. In Kant, conversely, this finitude, our separation from the Absolute, is the *positive* condition of our freedom. In short, the condition of impossibility is the condition of possibility. In this sense, Susan Neiman is right to remark that “the worry that fueled debates about the difference between appearance and reality was *not* the fear that the world might not turn out to be the way it seems to us—but rather the fear that it would.”<sup>7</sup> This fear is ultimately ethical: the closure of the gap between appearance and reality would deprive us of our freedom and thus of our ethical dignity. What this means is that the gap between noumenal reality and appearance is redoubled: one has to distinguish between noumenal reality “in itself” and the way noumenal reality *appears* within the domain of appearance (say, in our experience of freedom and the moral Law). This tiny edge distinguishing the two is the edge between the sublime and the horrible: God is sublime for us from our finite perspective, but experienced in itself, God would turn into a mortifying horror.<sup>8</sup> The Kantian transcendental is irreducibly rooted in the empirical/temporal/finite—it is the trans-phenomenal *as it appears within the finite horizon of temporality*. And this dimension of the transcendental (specifically as opposed to the noumenal) is precisely what is absent in Spinoza, the philosopher of infinite immanence.

Consequently, do we not find the distinction between how things appear to me and how things *effectively* appear to me in the very heart of Kant’s transcendental turn? Phenomenal reality is not simply the way things appear to me: it designates the way things “really” appear to me, the way they constitute phenomenal reality, as opposed to a mere subjective/illusory appearance. When I misperceive some object in my phenomenal reality, when I mistake it for a different object, what is wrong is not that I am unaware of how things “really are in themselves,” but

of how they “really appear” to me. One cannot overestimate the importance of this Kantian move. Ultimately, philosophy as such is Kantian, and it should be read from the vantage point of the Kantian revolution: not as a naive attempt at “absolute knowledge,” at a total description of the entirety of reality, but as the work of deploying the horizon of pre-understanding presupposed in every engagement with entities in the world. It is only with Kant (with his notion of the transcendental) that true philosophy begins: what we had before was a simple global ontology, the knowledge about All, and not yet the notion of the transcendental-hermeneutic horizon of the World. Consequently, the basic task of post-Kantian thought was “only” to think Kant through to the end. This is what, among others, Heidegger’s intention was in *Being and Time*: to read the history of ontology (Descartes, Aristotle) backwards from Kant—say, to interpret Aristotle’s physics as the hermeneutic deployment of what being, life, and so on meant for the Greeks. (Later, unfortunately, Heidegger renounced this idea of pursuing to the end the Kantian breakthrough, dismissing Kant’s transcendental turn as a further step in the course of the subjectivist forgetting of Being.) The ultimate irony is that Deleuze was, in a way, fully aware of this fact: in his 1978 lectures on Kant he claims that, for Kant, “there is no longer the essence behind the appearance, there is the sense or non-sense of what appears,” a move, he goes on to say, that bears witness to “a radically new atmosphere of thought, to the point where I can say that in this respect we are all Kantians.”<sup>9</sup>

What does Hegel bring to this constellation? He is not any kind of “mediator” between the two extremes of Spinoza and Kant. On the contrary, from a truly Hegelian perspective, the problem with Kant is that *he remains all too Spinozian*: the crack-less, seamless positivity of Being is merely transposed onto the inaccessible In-Itself. In other words, from the Hegelian standpoint, this very fascination with the horrible Noumenon in itself is the ultimate lure: the thing to do here is not to rehabilitate the old Leibnizean metaphysics, even in the guise of heroically forcing one’s way into the noumenal “heart of darkness” and confronting its horror, but to transpose this absolute gap which separates us from the noumenal Absolute into the Absolute itself. Thus, when Kant asserts the limitation of our knowledge, Hegel does not answer him by claiming that he can overcome the Kantian gap and thereby gain access to Absolute Knowledge in the style of a pre-critical metaphysics. What he claims is that the Kantian gap already *is* the solution: Being itself is incomplete. *This* is what Hegel’s motto “one should conceive the Absolute not only as Substance, but also as Subject” means: “subject” is the name for a crack in the edifice of Being. This dimension gets lost in Fichte and Schelling, who both

assert intellectual intuition as the solution of Kant's inconsistencies, of (as they see it) a hidden dogmatism that sustains Kant's criticism. Fichte starts with the thetic judgment: *Ich = Ich*, pure immanence of Life, pure Becoming, pure self-positing, *Tat-Handlung*, the full coincidence of posited with positing. I only am through my process of positing myself, and I am nothing but this process; *this* is intellectual intuition, this mystical flow that is inaccessible to reflexive consciousness:

Thus what Fichte calls "intellectual intuition" is no longer seen here as belonging to the inner sense but to the unconditional absolute which is beyond the circle of self-consciousness. . . . Unlike Kant's regulative idea of Reason, Reason here is the idea of God as an immediate, absolute, unconditional identity. The immediate awareness of the Spirit of its absolute will which can never be further grounded in concept, is what Schelling calls in this essay "intellectual intuition." It is intuition because it is not yet mediated by concept, and it is intellectual because it goes beyond the empirical in that it has as its predicate its self-affirmation.<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, for Fichte and for Schelling, our thinking can overcome the stance of external reflection and, in intellectual intuition, achieve full identity with the Thing itself. Hegel, however, follows a radically different path here. For him, overcoming reflective reasoning does not mean leaving it behind for an immediate unity with the Absolute, but elevating reflection itself into the Absolute, that is, depriving it of the In-itself which is supposed to elude it. With regard to the opposition between *intellectus archetypus* (divine understanding) and *intellectus ectypus* (human understanding), Hegel's claim is not simply that we can overcome the limitation of *ectypus* and pass to *archetypus* as the intellect which spontaneously generates all particular content out of itself, its form, with no need for external input; Hegel's point is rather that we should radically shift our perspective on *ectypus*, conceiving (what appears as) its limitation as its positive feature—a move structurally parallel to the opposition between Understanding (*Verstand*) and Reason (*Vernunft*): Reason is for Hegel not a special ability beyond Understanding; Reason is Understanding itself without its Beyond.

"Understanding" is usually understood as the elementary form of analyzing, of drawing the lines of fixed differences and identities, that is, of reducing the wealth of reality to an abstract set of features. From this perspective, the Understanding's spontaneous tendency towards identitarian reification then has to be corrected by dialectical Reason, which faithfully reproduces the dynamic complexity of reality by way of

outlining the fluid network of relations within which every identity is located. This network generates every identity and, simultaneously, causes its ultimate downfall. This, however, is emphatically *not* the way Hegel conceives the difference between Understanding and Reason. Let us carefully read yet again a well-known passage from the foreword to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

To break an idea up into its ultimate elements means to return to its moments, which at least do not have the form of the given idea, but rather constitute the immediate property of the self. This analysis, to be sure, only arrives at *thoughts* which are themselves familiar, fixed, and inert determinations. But what is thus *separated* and non-actual is an essential moment; for it is only because the concrete does divide itself, and make itself into something non-actual, that it is self-moving. The activity of dissolution is the power and work of the *Understanding*, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power. The circle that remains self-enclosed and, like substance, holds its moments together, is an immediate relationship, one therefore which has nothing astonishing about it. But that an accident as such, detached from what circumscribes it, what is bound and is actual only in its context with others, should attain an existence of its own and a separate freedom—that is the tremendous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of the pure “I.”<sup>11</sup>

Understanding, precisely in its aspect of analyzing, of tearing the unity of a thing or process apart, is here celebrated as “the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power”—as such, it is, surprisingly (for those who stick to the common view of dialectics), characterized in exactly the same terms as Spirit, which, with regard to the opposition between Understanding and Reason, is clearly on the side of Reason: “Spirit is, in its simple truth, consciousness, and forces its moments apart.”<sup>12</sup> Everything turns on how we are to understand this identity-and-difference between Understanding and Reason: it is not that reason adds something to the separating power of Understanding, reestablishing (at some “higher level”) the organic unity of what Understanding has torn apart, supplementing analysis with synthesis; Reason is, in a way, not more but *less* than Understanding. To put it in Hegel’s well-known terms of the opposition between what one wants to say and what one actually says, Reason is what Understanding, in its activity, *really does*, in contrast to what it wants/means to do. Reason is therefore not another facility supplementing Understanding’s “one-sidedness”: the very idea that there is something (the core of the substantial content of the ana-

lyzed thing) that eludes Understanding, a trans-rational Beyond out of its reach, is the fundamental illusion of Understanding. In other words, all we have to do to get from Understanding to Reason is to *subtract* from Understanding its constitutive illusion. Understanding is not too abstract/violent; it is, on the contrary, as Hegel put it apropos Kant, *too soft towards things*, afraid to locate its violent movement of tearing things apart into things themselves. In a way, it is epistemology versus ontology: the illusion of Understanding is that its own analytic power is only an “abstraction,” something external to “true reality,” which persists out there intact in its inaccessible fullness. In other words, it is the standard critical view of Understanding and its power of abstraction (that it is just an impotent intellectual exercise missing the wealth of reality) that contains the core illusion of Understanding. To put it yet another way, the mistake of Understanding is to perceive its own negative activity (of separating, tearing things apart) only in its negative aspect, ignoring its “positive” (productive) aspect. Reason is Understanding itself in its productive aspect.<sup>13</sup>

The act of abstraction, of tearing apart, can also be understood as the act of self-imposed blindness, of refusing to “see it all.” In his *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man deployed a refined reading of Derrida’s “deconstruction” of Rousseau in *On Grammatology*.<sup>14</sup> His thesis is that, in presenting Rousseau as a “logocentrist” caught in the metaphysics of presence, Derrida overlooks how motifs and theoretical moves of deconstructing the metaphysics of presence are already operative in Rousseau’s text. Often, the “deconstructive” point that Derrida is making about Rousseau is already articulated by Rousseau himself. Furthermore, this overlooking is not an accidental oversight but a structural necessity: Derrida can only see what he sees (deploy his deconstructive reading) through such blindness. And it would have been easy to demonstrate the same paradoxical overlapping of blindness and insight in other of Derrida’s great readings—say, his detailed reading of Hegel in *Glas*. Here also, the price for the complex theoretical move of demonstrating how Hegel doesn’t see that a condition of impossibility is a condition of possibility, how he produces something whose status he has to disavow in order to maintain the consistency of his edifice, is to enact a violent simplification of the underlying frame of Hegel’s thought. Hegel’s basic frame is reduced to the absolute-idealist “metaphysics of presence” where the Idea’s self-mediation is able to reduce all Otherness, and all Hegel’s formulations which run against this image are read as so many signs of Hegel’s symptomatic inconsistency, of Hegel not being able to control his own theoretical production, of being forced to say something more than (and different from) what he wanted to say.

Both Fichte and Schelling fall short of this insight. They both posit

as the starting point, the “absolute beginning,” the principle of all principles; while Fichte asserts intellectual intuition as the unconditional spontaneity of thinking or the self-activity of the subject, Schelling sees it as the way to overcome the very opposition of subject and object, as the full immediate unity of subject and object, as the unconditionally spontaneous, self-generating unity of flow and immobility, activity and passivity, intellect and intuition, whose first model is the identity of Atman (Self) and Brahman (God) in Vedanta. Against Schelling, who elevates intellectual intuition into the “highest organon of philosophy,” Hegel rejects it as a return to immediacy and so in a way returns to Kant, who draws a key distinction between the consciousness of self-activity and the thinking of the “I”: the former belongs to intuition, while the latter belongs to thinking—that is, self-activity is given to us in the way of the “sensual intuition,” while the “I” is conceived in the way of “the intellectual thinking” without appearing. In this way, “self-activity” as phenomenon and the “I” separate themselves from each other, and because of this separation “the consciousness of self is thus very far from being a knowledge of the self.”<sup>15</sup> For Kant, only a divine intellect (God) would be able to overcome the gap that separates intellect from intuition. This is what he calls *intellectus archetypus*, or “divine understanding,” “which should not represent to itself given objects, but through whose representation the objects should themselves be given or produced.”<sup>16</sup> This “*intuitus originarius*” means “the intuition which can itself give us the existence of its object,” in contrast to our finite “*intuitus derivativus*,” which gets its content from external reality and is thus not spontaneous: “We can signify this intuition as ‘creative intuition’ too, because it is on one hand not a passive receptive intuition but an intuition through which the existence of given objects is determined in the same process of intuition.”<sup>17</sup> Intellectual intuition is thus “not a faculty of cognition but that of creation,” “a faculty of production”: “Such an understanding would not function in a world of appearances, but directly in the world of things-in-themselves. Its power of giving the universal (concepts and ideas) would not be a separate power from its power of forming intuitions of particular things; concept and thing, thought and reality would be one.”<sup>18</sup> We must read Hegel very precisely here, since he appears to celebrate the progress from Kant to Fichte and Schelling: for him, Kant poses finite empirical knowledge as the only real knowledge and then has to treat the higher knowledge as merely subjective—in short, he himself creates the obstacle that he then finds impossible to surpass. But how does Hegel then move beyond Kant with regard to *intellectus archetypus*? Not by simply claiming that the unity of *intellectus archetypus* is actual, the actuality of Reason in its self-mediating productivity which doesn’t need to rely on any exter-

nal in-itself, but by rejecting the very notion of *intellectus archetypus* as an illusory projection which wants to have its cake and eat it too, similar to today's idea of posthuman singularity in the brain sciences. (Singularity may appear to be an unexpected realization, the latest form, of Hegel's *Weltgeist*, a world-spirit acquiring positive existence, but the ideologists of singularity ignore the costs of the passage from human to posthuman: the disappearance of self-awareness, which is rooted in finitude and failure.)

### From *Intellectus Ectypus* to *Intellectus Archetypus*

Here is the core of Kant's argument that brings him to posit the idea of *intellectus archetypus*. He begins with the distinction between "determinate judgments" (which refer to phenomenal objective reality) and "reflective judgments" (which refer to our subjective exercise of reasoning):

There is clearly a big difference between saying that certain things of nature, or even all of nature, could be produced only by a cause that follows intentions in determining itself to action, and saying that *the peculiar character of my cognitive powers* is such that the only way I can judge how those things are possible and produced is by conceiving, to account for this production, a cause that acts according to intentions, and hence a being that produces things in a way analogous to the causality of an understanding. If I say the first, I am trying to decide something about the object, and am obliged to establish that a concept I have assumed has objective reality. If I say the second, reason determines only how I must use my cognitive powers commensurately with their peculiarity and with the essential conditions imposed by both their range and their limits. Hence the first is an *objective* principle for determinative judgment, the second a subjective principle for merely reflective judgment and hence a maxim imposed on it by reason.<sup>19</sup>

Kant's next step is deploy the necessary ("completely unavoidable") and at the same time only subjective character of reflexive judgments:

For if we want to investigate the organized products of nature by continued observation, we find it completely unavoidable to apply [*unterlegen*] to nature the concept of an intention, so that even for our empirical use of reason this concept is an absolutely necessary maxim. . . . But

what does even the most complete teleology of all prove in the end? Does it prove, say, that such an intelligent being exists? No; all it proves is that, given the character of our cognitive powers, i.e., in connecting experience with the supreme principles of reason, we are absolutely unable to form a concept of how such a world is possible except by thinking of it as brought about by a supreme cause that *acts intentionally*. Hence we cannot objectively establish the proposition: There is an intelligent original being; we can do so only subjectively, for the use of our judgment as it reflects on the purposes in nature, which are unthinkable on any principle other than that of an intentional causality of a supreme cause.<sup>20</sup>

Now comes the most problematic intermediate step: Kant links the gap between objective reality and subjective reasoning to the distinction between actuality and possibility. In objective reality there are no possibilities, just actualities, just what there is; possibilities exist only for our finite mind, which can imagine concepts of non-existing things, things not given to us in sensible intuition. For a subject to whom reality would be directly accessible the way it is in itself, given to it in intuition, there would be no possibilities, just actual objects:

It is indispensable [and] necessary for human understanding to distinguish between the possibility and the actuality of things, and this fact has its basis in the subject and in the nature of his cognitive powers. For if the exercise of these powers did not require two quite heterogeneous components, understanding to provide concepts, and sensible intuition to provide objects corresponding to these, then there would be no such distinction (between the possible and the actual). If our understanding were intuitive rather than conceptual it would have no objects except actual ones. For we would then be without concepts (and these deal with the mere possibility of an object) and also be without sensible intuitions (which do give us something actual, yet without allowing us to cognize it as an object). But our entire distinction between the merely possible and the actual rests on this: in saying that a thing is possible we are positing only the presentation of it with respect to our concept and to our thinking ability in general; but in saying that a thing is actual we are positing the thing itself [*an sich selbst*] (apart from that concept). Hence the distinction between possible and actual things holds merely subjectively, for human understanding. For even if something does not exist, we can still have it in our thoughts; or we can present something as given, even though we have as yet no concept of it.<sup>21</sup>



Kant is here close to our common sense: possibility does not exist in reality itself, it is just an effect of the limitation of our understanding—that is, an event appears as possible because we do not get the entire complex causal link that determines it. Nikolai Bukharin, in his standard textbook *Historical Materialism*, applies this logic to revolution itself:

If we know the laws of social growth, the paths along which society necessarily travels, the direction of this evolution, it will not be difficult for us to define the future society. In social science we have had many instances of such predictions which have been fully justified by the outcome. On the basis of our knowledge of the laws of social evolution, we predicted economic crises, the devaluation of paper money, the world war, the social revolution as a result of the war. . . . We cannot predict the *time* of the appearance of any such phenomenon, for we do not yet possess sufficient information regarding the laws of social evolution to be able to express them in precise figures. We do not know the *velocity* of the social processes, but we are already in a position to ascertain their *direction*.<sup>22</sup>

One has to raise here the obvious naive reproach: but why should possibility not be a property of reality itself? The question that immediately arises here is: if possibility is a property of reality itself, how are we to think it? Do we have to conceive reality itself as minimally “open,” contingent in an intrinsic way, “underdetermined” (not completely determined)? And, with regard to thinking: does not thinking involve imagining beyond reality, playing with hypotheses and alternative scenarios? If this is true, would not divine thought limited to actuality be unfree?

Here is Kant’s own description of such thinking: “An understanding to which this distinction did not apply would mean: All objects cognized by me *are* (exist); such a being could have no presentation whatever of the possibility that some objects might not exist after all, i.e., of the contingency of those that do exist, nor, consequently, of the necessity to be distinguished from that contingency.”<sup>23</sup> Plus, since the Ought-to-be only has meaning in the dimension of possibility (what is a fact, something that already is, cannot be presented as our duty to do it), there would be no gap between Is and Ought in *intellectual archetypus*:

It is clear, therefore, that only because of the subjective character of our practical ability do we have to present moral laws as commands (and the actions conforming to them as duties) and does reason express this necessity not by *is* (i.e., happens) but by *ought to be*. This would not be the case if we considered reason, regarding its causality, as being with-

out sensibility (the subjective condition for applying reason to objects of nature), and hence as being a cause in an intelligible world that harmonized throughout with the moral law. For in such a world there would be no difference between obligation and action, between a practical law that says what is possible through our doing, and the theoretical law that says what is actual through our doing.<sup>24</sup>

Now, finally, *intellectual archetypus* enters the stage as an intellect clearly contrasted to our finite mind. One has to take note of the subtlety of Kant's reasoning here: "we had to have in mind a possible different intuition if we wanted to consider ours as a special kind"<sup>25</sup>—that is, our finite *intellectus ectypus* is not only logically opposed to *intellectual archetypus* (in the sense of black versus white, big versus small, etc.), but immediately appears as "a special kind," a distortion of a presupposed universal model (in the sense in which, say, a human being with only one leg is immediately perceived as a distorted, special version of a human being with two legs). The opposition of *intellectual archetypus* and *intellectus ectypus* is not the opposition of two species of *intellectus*, but the opposition of the universal and (one of) its particular species, which is why the opposite does not hold—that is, in order to imagine the divine *intellectual archetypus* we do not "ha[ve] to have in mind a possible different intuition," our finite *intellectus ectypus*:

We must here be presupposing the idea of some possible understanding different from the human one (just as, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we had to have in mind a possible different intuition if we wanted to consider ours as a special kind, namely, as an intuition for which objects count only as appearances). Only by presupposing this idea can we say that because of the special character of our understanding *must we consider* certain natural products, as to how they are possible, as having been produced intentionally and as purposes.<sup>26</sup>

In order to understand the mention of purpose here, we have to backtrack Kant's reasoning.

For Kant, when we encounter living beings and try to understand them, we cannot do this without perceiving their activity and organs as in some sense purposeful: animals have eyes to see with, teeth to grab food, legs to move; however, purposefulness is not a category that is constitutive of our phenomenal reality (as are the transcendental categories of cause and effect), which is also why purposefulness is not a category we are allowed to use (to apply to natural phenomena) in the sciences, where to explain a thing means to account for it in terms of causal networks,

not in terms of their purposes. For this reason, as Kant notices, there is no Newton of biology—organisms (living beings) are out of the scope of determinist science: in an organism, parts are not just external to the Whole but are its organs, organically subordinated to the Whole by their purpose. As such, an organism already enacts the first step towards overcoming the duality of reason and intuition: in an organism, its empirical components (objects of our sensuous intuition) are not just its external, contingent stuff; rather, they are organically rooted in its Whole and are moments of the organism's self-reproduction—that is, in an organism, the universal concept already “organically” engenders out of itself its parts, particularizes itself in them. (We should here leave aside speculations about how Kant would have reacted to Darwinism, which does precisely what Kant considers impossible: it accounts for the appearance of purposefulness in a scientific way, from the non-purposeful interaction of elements, and in this sense Darwin *was* the Newton of biology. If Kant were to accept this option, then intellectual intuition, the view of things as they are in themselves, would not consist in the vision of a higher universe of divine purposes, but in a much more terrifying vision of the entire reality reduced to the interaction of “marionettes” deprived of freedom, as Kant himself suggests towards the end of his *Critique of Practical Reason*.) The vision of reality proper to intellectual intuition, a vision in which the gap between intellect and intuition, between universal form and particular/contingent/empirical content is closed, would also free our intellect of its dependence on heterogeneous content—in it, our intellect would achieve perfect and full spontaneity:

We find this contingency quite naturally in the *particular* that judgment has to bring under the *universal* supplied by the concepts of the understanding. For the universal supplied by *our* (human) understanding does not determine the particular; therefore even if different things agree in a common characteristic, the variety of ways in which they may come before our perception is contingent. For our understanding is a power of concepts, i.e., a discursive understanding, so that it must indeed be contingent for it as to what the character and all the variety of the particular may be that can be given to it in nature and that can be brought under its concepts. Now [all] cognition requires [not only understanding] but also intuition; and a power of *complete spontaneity* [as opposed to receptivity] of intuition would be a cognitive power different from, and wholly independent of, sensibility: thus a power of complete spontaneity of intuition would be an understanding in the most general sense of the term.<sup>27</sup>

Kant adds a key qualification here: we do not have to prove the actuality of the *intellectual archetypus* capable of such intuition; we do not even have to prove its possibility. For the *intellectual archetypus* to perform its necessary function, it is enough to posit it as a consistent (noncontradictory) presupposition—in short, it is enough to *think it*: “we do not have to prove that such an *intellectus archetypus* is possible. Rather, we must prove only that the contrast [between such an intellect and] our discursive understanding—an understanding which requires images (it is an *intellectus ectypus*)—and the contingency of its having this character lead us to that idea (of an *intellectus archetypus*), and we must prove that this idea does not involve a contradiction.”<sup>28</sup> The paradox here is that although Kant proclaims the identity of thinking and being, of producing and perceiving, to be impossible for our finite mind, something formally similar to this happens with *intellectual archetypus*: presupposing it (in our thinking) is enough (and, we may add, *it has to remain a pure presupposition in order to function*—if its existence in reality were to be demonstrated, the effect would be catastrophic). What we get here is Kant at his postmodern best, celebrating the power of pure presupposition, of a necessary illusion as constitutive of our sense of reality (we have to presuppose that our universe is dominated by God if we want to perceive it as a consistent Whole), but at the same time asserting the irreducible gap between our reality, regulated by a necessary illusion, and the Real, the In-itself, which may well be a chaotic monstrosity.

From this perspective, Hegel’s critique of Kant’s notion of *intellectus archetypus* cannot but appear as a retrograde phenomenon, a closure of the gap and a retranslation of Kant into traditional Aristotelian-Thomist ontology: Kant doesn’t see that, far from being just our subjective regulative Idea, the Idea (of the supreme Good, of an intellect which is more “true” than our phenomenal sensuous reality) is the supreme actuality itself, the Reason that rules the world and mediates all antinomies. As expected, Hegel praises Kant’s “idea of a universal which implicitly contains the particular”—what for Kant, Hegel adds, is “the precise object of the faculty of judgment”—and appears to give it an Aristotelian-Thomist spin: “Purpose is the Notion, and immanent; not external form and abstraction as distinguished from a fundamental material, but penetrating, so that all that is particular is determined by this universal itself.”<sup>29</sup> Kant misses this, since for him “the wealth of thought . . . still unfolds itself . . . in subjective form alone; all fullness, all content, concentrates in conceiving, thinking, postulating. The objective, according to Kant, is only what is in itself; and we know not what Things-in-themselves are. But Being-in-itself is only the *caput mortuum*, the dead abstraction of the ‘other,’ the

empty, undetermined Beyond.”<sup>30</sup> The opposition between Kant and post-Kantian German Idealism is thus the opposition between Understanding and Reason: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel assert the Absolute as a speculative power which generates all content out of its own self-movement, while Kant, in spite of his speculative insights, remains caught in the crude oppositions of Understanding:

The reason why that true Idea should not be the truth is therefore that the empty abstractions of an understanding which keeps itself in the abstract universal, and of a sensuous material of individuality standing in opposition to the same, are presupposed as the truth. Kant no doubt expressly advances to the conception of an intuitive or perceiving understanding, which, while it gives universal laws, at the same time determines the particular; and the determination thus given is deep; it is the true concrete, reality determined by the indwelling Notion, or, as Spinoza says, the adequate Idea. . . . But that this “*intellectus archetypus*” is the true Idea of the understanding, is a thought which does not strike Kant. Strange to say, he certainly has this idea of the intuitive; and he does not know why it should have no truth—except because our understanding is otherwise constituted, namely such “that it proceeds from the analytic universal to the particular.”<sup>31</sup>

In short, while Kant already formulated “the Idea of Thought, which is in itself the absolute Notion, and has in itself difference, reality,” he recoiled from it into “a complete philosophy of the Understanding which renounces Reason”: “With Kant, therefore, the result is: ‘We know only phenomena’; with Jacobi, on the other hand, it is: ‘We know only the finite and conditioned.’ Over these two results there has been unmingled joy among men, because the sloth of Reason (Heaven be praised!) considered itself liberated from every call to reflect, and now, being saved the trouble of penetrating to its own inward meaning and exploring the depths of Nature and Spirit, it could very well leave itself alone.”<sup>32</sup>

However, such a simplistic reading of Hegel’s thought as a return to pre-critical metaphysics misses the subtle point of Hegel’s critique of Kant indicated by the weird characterization of Kant as a thinker who succumbed to the mortal sin of the “sloth of Reason.” In what, precisely, resides this “laziness” of Kant’s thought that gives rise to “unmingled joy” in his “critical” followers? It resides in what, in his reading of Kant’s antinomies, Hegel criticizes as Kant’s “excess of tenderness for things of the world”: the moment Kant gets entangled in contradictions and antinomies when thinking beyond the finite horizon of our sensuous experience, he takes this (contradictions and antinomies) as proof that we are

dealing with our subjective processes and not with things themselves, for Kant insists that there cannot be contradictions in things.<sup>33</sup> For Hegel, on the contrary, contradictions and antinomies are the innermost features of things themselves, even (and especially) of God as the highest “thing.” Imagine all the deadlocks and reversals our thinking goes through when trying to penetrate a topic that eludes our grasp. The basic premise of what Hegel calls idealism is that this movement is not just the movement of our mind grappling with the thing, but something immanent to the thing itself: what appears as an epistemological process reveals itself to be part of the ontological structure of the thing itself.

This is why, for Hegel, antinomies are not a problem but (their own) solution, and this is also how Hegel “overcomes” the Kantian gap between “Is” and “Ought,” between ontology and deontology: he transposes the tension that characterizes deontology (things are never what they ought to be) into ontology itself, in the same way that our effort to penetrate reality *is* reality: “The defect of Kant’s philosophy consists in the falling asunder of the moments of the absolute form; or, regarded from the other side, our understanding, our knowledge, forms an antithesis to Being-in-itself: there is lacking the negative, the abrogation of the ‘ought,’ which is not laid hold of.”<sup>34</sup> Accusing Kant of “falling asunder” the moments of the Absolute has to be taken in a very precise sense: what “falls asunder” in Kant’s thought is the Absolute in its transcendent immobility and the movement of subjective mediation which cannot attain the Absolute. In other words, the power of thinking is precisely the power of “falling asunder,” of tearing apart what organically belongs together, and Kant is afraid to transpose this “falling asunder” into the Absolute itself. Consequently, in contrast to intellectual intuition as the immediate identity of subject and object, activity and perceiving, the Hegelian speculative identity of subject and object, of thinking and acting, is not a blissful, pre-reflexive intuitive unity but a unity mediated by gap. The domain of Being is in itself non-All, thwarted, and “thinking” is the activation of this hole in the order of being—we “think” imaginatively beyond being, into what doesn’t exist or may exist. There is “thinking” because being is not identical with itself but thwarted, marked by a fundamental impossibility, so that “thinking and being are identical” in the sense of a continuous extreme.<sup>35</sup> There are three main traditional versions of the unity of thinking and being: the mystical-intuitive experience of their identity (intellectual intuition); the Aristotelian-Thomist vision of a rational universe regulated by divine purposes; and the Spinozian-materialist version of complete determinism. Hegel cannot be reduced to any of these, since his unity involves radical instability and tension, the assertion of a radical gap. In religious terms, Hegel is on the side of Protestantism against the

Catholic organic harmony of the universe. Hegel's "unity" resides *only* in the transposition of this gap into the Absolute itself.

## Notes

1. Peter Sloterdijk, *Das Schelling-Projekt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2016), 144; my translation.

2. See *ibid.*

3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), 331–32.

4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1956), 152–53.

5. For more on this distinction between the Kantian and the Hegelian Real, see the final chapter of my *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), "Not Only as *Substance*, but also as *Subject*."

6. This is the very definition of what Kant calls "diabolical evil," an act which is not driven by any pathological motivation but which is done "just for the sake of it," elevating evil itself to an a priori, non-pathological motivation—something akin to Edgar Allan Poe's "imp of the perverse." While Kant claims that diabolical evil cannot actually occur (it is not possible for a human being to elevate evil itself into a universal ethical norm), he nonetheless asserts that one should posit it as an abstract possibility.

7. Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 11.

8. The explosion of an atomic bomb is sometimes called sublime on account of the irrepresentable violence it causes. But is this still the Kantian sublime? In Kant, the effect of the sublime is caused by the discrepancy between the natural violence and the strength of the noumenal moral law: even nature at its strongest cannot adequately represent the noumenal force. Obviously, the sublime effect of a nuclear explosion cannot reside in this because there is no moral noumenal domain evoked in a negative way when we witness it. What there is, however, is the idea of a force that is irrepresentable within the frame of our phenomenal reality, which does not fit into it, which appears to cause the disintegration of the very texture of our reality.

9. Gilles Deleuze, "Deleuze/Kant: Cours Vincennes: Synthesis and Time," March 14, 1978, <https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/66>.

10. Saitya Brata Das, "Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/schellin/>.

11. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press 1977), 18–19.

12. *Ibid.*, 266.

13. In a strict homology to this Hegelian logic, it is meaningless to demand that psychoanalysis should be supplemented by psycho-synthesis, reestablishing the organic unity of the person shattered by psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis already is this synthesis.

14. See Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

15. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 169.

16. *Ibid.*, 565, 161.

17. *Ibid.*, 90; Liangkang Ni, *Zur Sache des Bewusstseins: Phänomenologie—Buddhismus—Konfuzianismus* (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2010), 208.

18. Douglas Burnham, *An Introduction to Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 151–52.

19. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1987), 280.

20. *Ibid.*, 280–81.

21. *Ibid.*, 284–85.

22. Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 49.

23. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 286.

24. *Ibid.*, 286–87.

25. *Ibid.*, 289.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, 290.

28. *Ibid.*, 292–93.

29. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 466–67.

30. *Ibid.*, 472.

31. *Ibid.*, 472–73.

32. *Ibid.*, 476–77.

33. G. W. F. Hegel, *Logic*, trans. William Wallace (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 77.

34. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 478.

35. So what does Hegelian reconciliation amount to? Is it a victory of overcoming antagonisms, or a resigned acceptance that unresolvable antagonisms are part of our lives, its positive condition? The answer is an irreducible parallax: both at the same time—it can be looked upon as a triumph or as a resigned defeat.





# Lacan and Psychoanalytic Materialism



# Fear of Science: Transcendental Materialism and Its Discontents

Adrian Johnston

In October 2012, Graham Harman and I engaged in two debates over two days at the State University of New York at Buffalo. We were kindly invited by Joan Copjec and generously hosted by the Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture there. Harman and I agreed in advance that Quentin Meillassoux's "speculative materialism" would be the focus of our exchanges.

On the first of these two days at Buffalo, I presented a paper on Meillassoux and Harman responded to it. This paper ended up forming part of the "Postface" to my 2013 book *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume One: The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy*. Harman's response later was published, in a revised and expanded version, in the final issue of the sadly now-defunct journal *Umbr(a)*.<sup>1</sup> The second day at Buffalo involved us conversing with each other and with various event participants in the style of an open seminar session. A video of this conversation subsequently was made available online via YouTube.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of Harman's defenses of Meillassoux in the face of my criticisms, I leave readers to assess these against "Part Three" and the "Postface" of the first volume of my *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*.<sup>3</sup> At least for now, I have said all that I have to say about Meillassoux's philosophy. However, in Harman's *Umbr(a)* article responding to me, as well as elsewhere, he has voiced several objections to my own philosophical stance and related materialist positions that I thus far have not rebutted directly. In what follows, I will be offering some overdue replies to these objections (objections that surfaced in print after our joint appearances in Buffalo centered on Meillassoux).

Much of the present edited volume is devoted to critiquing the object-oriented ontology (OOO) of which Harman is a primary representative. My contribution here complements these critiques with a defense of materialism in the dialectical tradition. Moreover, Harman's complaints about the sort of materialist orientation I represent (along

with others, such as Slavoj Žižek) are not unique to OOO. As will be seen, non-OOO critics of transcendental materialism, such as the Lacanians Lorenzo Chiesa, Jan De Vos, and Ed Pluth, share a number of concerns with Harman. I thus have immanent as well as external critics to address. In a companion piece to the present contribution, I respond at length to Pluth's reservations regarding my work.<sup>4</sup> Hence, I herein will foreground Chiesa's and De Vos's criticisms in addition to those of Harman.

Like Pluth,<sup>5</sup> Harman assaults the Hegelianism common to Žižek and me as an antirealist spirit monism. Of course, this all-too-familiar caricature of Hegelian philosophy mistakes absolute for subjective idealism. That noted, Harman's favorite piece of evidence ("Exhibit A," as it were) in his case against Žižekian Hegelianism is a specific moment in a collection of interviews with Glyn Daly entitled *Conversations with Žižek*.<sup>6</sup> Harman is fond of referring to the following remarks by Žižek:

Here we can see in what sense Lenin, in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, tried to be a materialist: he was obsessed with the notion of the mind reflecting an objective reality existing outside. However, such a notion relies on a hidden idealism, because the idea that outside of our reflections there is objective reality presupposes that our mind, which reflects reality, functions as a gaze somehow external to this reality. Universalized perspectivism rejects any such gaze. The point is not that there is no reality outside our mind, the point is rather that there is no mind outside reality. The distortion of reality occurs precisely because our mind is part of reality. So when Lenin claims that we can only arrive at objective reality in an endless asymptotic process of approximation, what he overlooks is that our distortions of reality occur precisely *because* we are part of reality and therefore do not have a neutral view of it: our perception distorts reality because the observer is part of the observed. It is this universalized perspectivism which, I think, contains a radically materialist position.<sup>7</sup>

Žižek continues:

The true formula of materialism is not that there is some noumenal reality beyond our distorting perception of it. The only consistent materialist position is that the world does not exist—in the Kantian sense of the term, as a self-enclosed whole. The notion of the world as a positive universe presupposes an external observer, an observer not caught in it. The very position from which you can perceive the world as a self-enclosed whole is the position of an external observer. It is thus paradoxically this radical perspectivism which allows us to formulate a truly

materialist position, not that the world exists outside our mind, but that our mind does not exist outside the world. Lenin put the accent on the wrong point. The problem of materialism is not “does reality exist outside?” The problem is “does our mind exist?” How does my mind exist and how is it inherent to reality?<sup>8</sup>

Harman is quite right to take these passages as paradigmatic articulations of Žižek’s philosophical position. However, unfortunately for the objection Harman claims to base on them, these same passages reveal the allegation that Žižek espouses an antirealist *qua* subjectively idealist spirit monism to be quite wrong—to be, in fact, an unwarranted inversion of the truth (“The point is not that there is no reality outside our mind, the point is rather that there is no mind outside reality. The distortion of reality occurs precisely because our mind is part of reality”; “our mind does not exist outside the world”). Harman latches onto the line “the world does not exist” without acknowledging the crucial caveat immediately following it: “in the Kantian sense of the term, as a self-enclosed whole.” What this caveat unambiguously indicates is that Žižek does anything but, as Harman falsely charges, deny the real world’s existence *tout court*. Moreover, and as will be seen below, this same caveat apropos the world’s not-wholeness supports one of my lines of response to Harman’s Heideggerian accusation that my own materialist position is an instance of “onto-theology.”

As a Hegelian, what Žižek specifically denies is an objective world (as Kant’s noumenal kingdom of things-in-themselves in the guise of the cosmological idea of reason) that is maintained as consistent and complete exclusively in and through its *Verstand*-style divorce from and opposition to subjective mind. Put in Hegel’s own terms, Kant (and, according to Žižek on multiple occasions, the Lenin of 1908’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, as well as the Meillassoux of 2006’s *After Finitude* echoing this same Lenin)<sup>9</sup> confines himself to a one-sidedly incomplete ontology of substance by conceiving of subjectivity as entirely separate from substance. The incompleteness of this ontology is due precisely to its failure to encompass subjectivity, including the very subject(s) responsible for formulating this (or any other) ontology. By contrast, Hegel and Žižek (and myself as well) strive for ontologies conceiving of substance also as subject and vice versa,<sup>10</sup> of subjectivity as arising from but remaining thereafter immanently included within (while still also irreducible to) a not-whole substantiality (as conflicted, discordant, etc.). Žižek’s point in the two quotations above is that the traditional problem of mental subjectivity’s access to worldly objectivity (a problem framing the horizons of both Leninist and Meillassouxian realisms) is generated on the

basis of an ill-conceived subjectively idealist absolutization of the subject-object dichotomy in which subjectivity, however explicitly or implicitly, transcends objectivity (with this idealism compromising the materialism that such figures as Lenin and Meillassoux wish to uphold). Put differently, Žižek's critique of Lenin's realist materialism as per *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is that it regresses back to a pre-Hegelian and pre-Marxist "contemplative" stance in precisely the sense of the "contemplative materialism" (Feuerbach's included) from which Marx differentiates his (historical/dialectical) materialism in the first of his "Theses on Feuerbach" (a thesis indebted, whether Marx would admit this or not, to Hegel's substance also as subject).<sup>11</sup> In still other words, Žižek complains that Lenin (not to mention Meillassoux) is insufficiently realist and materialist, given his assumption of a mind needing to cross a chasm or rift so as to connect with the world (i.e., an otherworldly mind, rather than a mind already situated inside the world as an inseparable part of it).

Although I am firmly on Žižek's side here against Harman, Žižek and I have our own disagreements. I will not be rehearsing these on this occasion. Interested readers can consult "Part Two" of my book *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (2014) and/or my book *A New German Idealism: Hegel, Žižek, and Dialectical Materialism* (2018). However, one of the main bones of contention between Žižek and me has to do with the differences that physics and biology make to a materialist theory of subjectivity—with Žižek prioritizing quantum physics for such a theory, and me challenging this prioritization in favor of evolutionary theory and the neurosciences instead.<sup>12</sup> My recourse to neurobiology especially, in addition to being involved in my ongoing debates with Žižek, also has become a lightning rod for other critics, such as Harman, Pluth, Chiesa, and De Vos.

I turn now to Chiesa's discomfort with my recourses to the sciences of the brain. Responding specifically to my reflections on unconscious affects in my half of a book coauthored with Catherine Malabou (*Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience*, 2013), Chiesa remarks: "I have the impression that his recent writings on 'unconscious affects' . . . identify a Lacan in Lacan more than himself . . . for the primary sake of making him acceptable to contemporary affective neuroscience, and only *then* enabling him positively to influence it. Needless to say, I would very much welcome a rebuttal."<sup>13</sup> The sentiment expressed here is undeniably shared between Pluth and Chiesa alike. I deliberately use the word "sentiment" to describe this reaction of Pluth's and Chiesa's because it strikes me that the two of them resist affective neuroscience with (and on the basis of) affective non-/anti-science. What I mean by this is that they give the impression (however inaccurate this impression

might be) of harboring emotional investments in certain conceptions of Lacanian theory that lead them sometimes to mistake encounters between psychoanalysis and neurobiology as always being in the end zero-sum death matches between the two fields. From this perspective, Pluth and Chiesa appear to approach any staged interactions between, for instance, Lacan and (affective) neuroscience with the advance assumption that any such interactions inevitably will result in one side coming out the “winner” and the other the “loser.” As fans of Lacan, they arrive at what they (unconsciously) think of as a contest or match ready ahead of time to support their beloved side (to root for their home team, as it were). Pluth and Chiesa then correlatively misconstrue me as having switched sides, disloyally playing for or applauding the away team (and even booing or sabotaging the home team). Not unrelated to sporting spectacles, (neo)liberal capitalist market competition paradigms also associatively come to mind here (with these paradigms and their application to intellectual work being anathema to Marxism generally and its conception of the “general intellect” specifically).<sup>14</sup> Anyhow, evidently, my heart as well as my head are in the wrong place.

My “rebuttal,” which I sincerely hope Chiesa (and Pluth) indeed will “welcome,” is to insist that this fashion of viewing, however consciously or not, meetings between the psychoanalytic and the scientific is categorically mistaken. I reject the very perspective that serves as an implicit grounding premise of certain of their arguments against me. To make my motivations and commitments as crystal-clear as possible here: my sole loyalty is to truth, and I readily will betray everything else for it. I cheer wholeheartedly for the general intellect alone. That is to say, I flatly refuse to “pick winners” in advance of interdisciplinary exchanges. The one-and-only outcome from encounters between disciplines I root for is the possible emergence of true knowledge (not the definitive, unilateral victory of a preferred-ahead-of-time discipline over other disciplines). If this marks me as less than a fully orthodox Lacanian, I can live with that.

Moreover, the zero-sum/death-match depiction of psychoanalysis vis-à-vis biology not only implies the highly contentious and questionable presumption that a fundamental global incompatibility exists between the two fields, but also silently conceals the quite plausible alternate outlook, one that is anti-fundamentalist/globalizing, according to which the relative merits and statuses of specific psychoanalytic and biological concepts and phenomena with respect to each other can and should be assessed appropriately on a case-by-case basis and in a decidedly non-apriori manner. Combining a paraphrase of Freud with a phrase borrowed from the title of a book by the contemporary analytic epistemologist Paul Boghossian, I am tempted in this context to speak of



“resistances to (neuro)biology” (rather than, and coming from, psychoanalysis) amounting to a “fear of knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> For me, and in yet more borrowed words (now from Franklin D. Roosevelt), the only thing we have to fear is this fear itself. We certainly do not have to fear either that, as per De Vos, neurobiology is no better than astrology (or, following Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, phrenology) or that, as per Harman, “we still don’t have a clue” when it comes to relationships between brain and mind.<sup>16</sup>

With regard to affective neuroscience and De Vos in particular, his dismissal of my work on unconscious affect as “anti-Freudian”<sup>17</sup> indefensibly neglects the entirety of my portion of *Self and Emotional Life* in which, supported by a wealth of primary-source German and French textual details (all of which is appreciated by Chiesa),<sup>18</sup> I both: one, reveal the complexities of Freud’s shifting stances on unconscious affect; and two, show Lacan, despite his general reading of Freud on unconscious affect (a reading I severely problematize), to have a more nuanced and ambivalent take on affects, both conscious and unconscious, than is usually acknowledged (including by Lacan himself).<sup>19</sup> Having made these cases, the burden of proof now weighs squarely on the shoulders of all those who merely repeat the Lacanian (or, if I am right, pseudo-Lacanian) mantra according to which the unconscious and the affective are mutually exclusive.

Just as Pluth criticizes me (and Žižek) for running roughshod over an undialectical distinction between the “natural Real” and the philosophical/psychoanalytic one, Chiesa similarly takes me to task (also in the course of criticizing both Žižek and me) for allegedly mishandling the Lacanian distinction between the registers of the Real and the Symbolic. In Chiesa’s eyes:

Johnston does not draw a distinction . . . between difference (the barred symbolic, or not-two; the—linguistically sexual, for Lacan—oscillation between the One and that which is other than One) and indifference (the barred real, or not-One, that in-differentiates itself into the barred symbolic). Putting forward this distinction is in my opinion the only way in which we can account for the preservation, justifiably defended by Johnston, of the distinction between the barred real and the barred symbolic. However, Johnston argues, contradictorily, that the barred real is different from the barred symbolic, yet the barred real is just as differential as the barred symbolic, even *prior* to having holes bored in it by the impacts of signifiers: “Nature *too* (i.e., the not-All material universe of physical beings) could be described as ‘at war with itself.’” Or, similarly, forgetting that nature first and foremost gives

itself to us as Hegel's *Es ist so* (or as Pascal's "eternal silence" of infinite space), that it can be thought as meta-statically persisting as indifferent irrespectively of discursive/differential nature (and the imaginary cycles of movement/rest, rise/fall it induces), Johnston states that "naturalizing human beings"—i.e., stressing the continuity between the real and the symbolic—"entails a reciprocal denaturalization of natural being"—i.e., a barring of the real as prior to the symbolic.<sup>20</sup>

Precisely as a Hegelian, I am not contradicting myself in suggesting that there are both identities/continuities and differences/discontinuities between the (barred) Real and the (barred) Symbolic. But, to be more precise and specific via recourse to Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*, with its basic divisions into "Mechanics," "Physics" (including "Chemistry"), and "Organics," I by no means seek to deny the (in)difference of (to borrow Pluth's phrase) the natural Real as mechanical and physical with respect to *Geist* à la Hegel and/or the Symbolic à la Lacan. For instance, in line with Hegelian *Naturphilosophie*, I consider the clashes and collisions within and between the strata of nature's inanimate dimensions to be drastically different from the differential relations between the signifiers of Lacanian symbolic orders.

I am guilty of anything but "forgetting" that the vast quantitative bulk of nature was, is, and will be substances subsisting independently of subjects (Hegel) or a Real serenely apart from any and every Symbolic (Lacan), as a text of mine first published in a volume edited by Chiesa himself readily attests.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Chiesa's indictment of this forgetfulness on my part is based upon two misunderstandings. When he observes, "Johnston states that 'naturalizing human beings'—i.e., stressing the continuity between the real and the symbolic—'entails a reciprocal denaturalization of natural being'—i.e., a barring of the real as prior to the symbolic," this both: one, incorrectly attributes to me a subjectively idealist (or even solipsistic) ontological outlook according to which (again to rely on Pluth) the natural Real is digested and mediated by the non-natural Symbolic utterly without remainder; and, two, mistakes what is an epistemological thesis about a concept—the thesis that a materialist reconceptualization of denaturalized subjectivity as fully immanent to natural substance requires a radical reconceptualization of the latter—for an ontological thesis about *Natur an sich*.

Moreover, I would suggest in turn that Chiesa himself forgets two important points here—ones equally (albeit differently) stressed by Hegel, Marx, and Lacan (as well as, avowedly influenced by these three, Žižek). First, nonhuman nature, when viewed with the benefit of admittedly belated human hindsight (i.e., that "anatomy of man" which is "key

to the anatomy of the ape”),<sup>22</sup> can be seen to contain certain structures and dynamics already, as it were, foreshadowing structures and dynamics that come to be associated with the distinctively “human” (as spiritual *als geistige*, subjective, minded/like-minded, socio-historical, Symbolic, etc.). To take an example employed by both Hegel and Lacan and directly relevant to Chiesa’s critical remarks quoted above, the differential interconnections characteristic of socio-symbolic spiritual orders, after (and only after) their contingent advent, appear to be anticipated by the objective logics of part-whole relationships that are operative beforehand within specifically organic nature. As Chiesa himself underscores in Lacanian terms, although the non-natural Symbolic is in some fashions separated as different-in-kind from the natural Real by a “break,” there are various other ways in which there is no “break.” Second, although the natural Real is by no means absolutely, entirely transformed by the non-natural Symbolic, it nonetheless is relatively, partially transformed thereby (a truth especially palpable in the new era of the Anthropocene). Whether through concrete universals, real abstractions, labor, praxis, signifiers falling into signifieds, or whatever else along these lines, Hegelian, Marxian, and Lacanian frameworks, ones shared between Chiesa, Žižek, and me, indeed maintain that the substances of the natural Real are affected and altered by the subjects of the more-than-natural Symbolic.

Whereas Chiesa worries about me reducing the natural Real to the non-natural Symbolic, Pluth, De Vos, and Harman all worry about reductions in the opposite direction. De Vos’s and Harman’s indictments of me for reductionism are much more vehement and full-throated by comparison with Pluth’s. For instance, De Vos pounces on part of a sentence from my contribution to the recent book coauthored with Malabou. He quotes me speaking of “brutal ordeals and overwhelming traumas as excessive ‘limit experiences’ violently unleashing unprocessed corporeal intensities pitilessly reducing those who suffer these experiences to the dehumanized state of naked animality, of convulsing, writhing flesh.”<sup>23</sup> De Vos seizes upon the phrase “convulsing, writhing flesh” in particular so as to paint a portrait of me (and Malabou too) as a crude naturalistic reductionist. He sees me as aggressively turning a blind eye toward not only Lacan’s comparatively much more sophisticated materialism and its development by Žižek—as an aside, and pitting my critics against each other, De Vos’s unfavorable comparison between my materialism and Žižek’s<sup>24</sup> can be set against Chiesa’s favorable one<sup>25</sup>—but also toward insidious ideological scientism generally and, following Michel Foucault, “biopolitics” and “biopower” specifically (with De Vos appearing, in my eyes at least, to flirt with the unjustifiable assertion, one also flirted with by Pluth,<sup>26</sup> that the life sciences are wholly and completely contami-

nated with ideology so as to be indelibly tainted politically).<sup>27</sup> In this vein, De Vos asserts, ostensibly against me, that “one is always already born in a vat of virtuality: there is no natural ‘you’ preceding this situation.”<sup>28</sup>

Although, as I explain elsewhere, I see serious philosophical and political problems with the Foucauldian notions of biopolitics and bio-power mobilized by De Vos,<sup>29</sup> I nonetheless, in the very context in which the offending line about “convulsing, writhing flesh” occurs, positively appeal to Giorgio Agamben’s distinction in his *Homo Sacer* project—a project inspired precisely by the later Foucault’s musings on matters “bio-” —between *zoē* and *bios*<sup>30</sup> (a distinction emphasizing exactly the same thing as De Vos’s just-quoted point about the “vat of virtuality”). I would maintain that anyone who reads pages 192 to 194 of *Self and Emotional Life* will see that De Vos selectively quotes me out of context and thereby fabricates a total misinterpretation of my position.<sup>31</sup> In terms of De Vos’s point about “the virtual vat” (i.e., *bios*, life 2.0, second nature, etc.) and the “natural ‘you’” (i.e., *zoē*, life 1.0, first nature, etc.), I carefully integrate just such a distinction into my framework. Like Agamben (as well as Jaak Panksepp),<sup>32</sup> I too contend that second nature (i.e., Agamben’s *bios*, Žižek’s life 2.0,<sup>33</sup> etc.) enjoys ontological priority over first nature (i.e., Agamben’s *zoē*, Žižek’s life 1.0, etc.) as a general rule for human beings. The exceptions to this rule, in which first nature (re)asserts itself as primary, are indeed exceptions. Moreover, these exceptions are rare artificial constructions rather than ubiquitous natural givens. I honestly am perplexed at how De Vos arrived at a picture of me as a naive, simpleminded materialist biopolitician on the basis of the precise passages in question. Maybe where he and I disagree is apropos his categorical, unqualified denial of the existence of any “natural ‘you’” *qua* *zoē*, life 1.0, first nature, etc. (i.e., when he says that “there is no natural ‘you’ preceding this situation”). If my dissension from De Vos on this matter makes me a reductionist (if so, then Lacan himself is a reductionist too),<sup>34</sup> it nevertheless definitely does not make me the crude reductionist of his caricatures (i.e., the vulgar naturalist boiling down and dissolving without a trace socio-symbolic *bios* into the “convulsing, writhing flesh” of a speechless, animalistic *zoē*).

Harman’s charges against me of reductionism likewise appear to assume that I am on the unsophisticated mechanistic or eliminativist end of the materialist spectrum.<sup>35</sup> Although at this stage my refutations of these charges ought to go without saying, I should note and respond to his contention that, as allegedly a crude/vulgar scientific reductionist, I leave no room whatsoever for any “autonomy.”<sup>36</sup> Of course, the main agenda of my transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity is to provide an account of robustly autonomous *qua* self-determining subjects

while nonetheless remaining within the parameters of an uncompromising, undiluted materialism. This central thread of my research program prompts Harman, in tension with his allegations of naturalist/physicalist reductionism, to tag me as a dualist.<sup>37</sup> By virtue of my Hegelianism with its sublations, I am neither a strict dualist nor an equally strict anti-dualist when it comes to subject-object relations. Additionally, my embraces of strong emergentism and Nancy Cartwright's "dappled world" of "nomological machines" within my fundamental ontology of "weak nature" opposes me to any and every inflexibly deterministic materialism in which there is only one Nature-with-a-capital-N as an unbarred big Other, namely, a seamless totality of heteronomous causal chains in which everything dissipates into the monochromatic abyss of a Spinozist-style substantial One-All.<sup>38</sup> Autonomy is far from absent from my system.

However, at this juncture, I owe Pluth, De Vos, Harman, and certain other of my critics a long-overdue confession: it turns out, as has come to light thanks to these invaluable interlocutors of mine, that I might very well be, so to speak, a weak reductionist. But what, exactly, am I admitting to with the phrase "weak reductionism"? To begin with, although I do not maintain that the central nervous system (or other objects falling entirely within the disciplinary territories of the sciences of nature) provides sufficient conditions for all or even a majority of features of subjectivity, I indeed do insist upon the brain being a necessary condition for any and every subject. Additionally, whereas Pluth, Chiesa, De Vos, and those of like minds wish to defend what seems to me to be an absolute autonomy, an unchecked sovereignty, of psychoanalysis and/or philosophy vis-à-vis empirical and/or experimental disciplines (the modern natural sciences first and foremost), I instead view philosophy and psychoanalysis as enjoying a relative (but not absolute) autonomy with respect to these other disciplines. I do so in the same way that Hegel, I would argue, delineates the positioning, within his encyclopedic system, of *Logik* in relation to *Realphilosophie* as both *Naturphilosophie* and *Geistesphilosophie*.<sup>39</sup>

This Hegelianism, entailing a rejection of being forced to choose in terms of a false pre-Kantian dilemma between an empiricist a posteriori and a rationalist a priori, also means that I do not, as Harman claims,<sup>40</sup> simply and "dismissively" think that "all *a priori* philosophical speculation is a waste of time."<sup>41</sup> (However, I justifiably do dismiss such speculation when, as in the case of Meillassoux's speculative materialism, it creates more problems than it solves.<sup>42</sup>) But if my confessed weak reductionism still warrants the Heideggerian epithet "onto-theology" that Harman hurls at me,<sup>43</sup> I am not bothered by this. First of all, I find Heidegger's German romantic, neo-Luddite one-size-fits-all narrative about the history of Western philosophy, reductively lumping together everyone from

Plato onward under a handful of labels (“onto-theology,” “metaphysics,” “the forgetting of Being,” “nihilistic enframing,” etc.), to be more concealing than revealing—to be, in fact, ultimately unconvincing and untenable in its sweeping generalizations.<sup>44</sup> But, secondly and more importantly, I already have taken great pains to spell out in careful argumentative detail how and why my materialism of “weak nature” secularizes *qua* de-theologizes the natural materiality of the traditional materialisms of the historical past.<sup>45</sup> I reject every image of Nature as Godlike, namely, as an omnipotent and totalizing unity, a Lacanian big Other and/or Badiouian One-All. If anything, an ontology of an ineffable, mysterious, un-specifiable Being-with-a-capital-B enigmatically creating worlds through its inexplicable “sendings” strikes me as much more of a theological ontology than the genetic ontology of an anti-reductive materialism that starts with nothing more than the factual givenness of an uncoordinated multitude of natural beings and occurrences without design or destiny.

Additionally, Harman accuses my materialist commitments of themselves being “dogmatic.”<sup>46</sup> But, given that the accusation is an epistemological one, which is more dogmatic: epistemologically responsible responsiveness to methodically gathered findings about this immanent one world we share—findings able to be defended, explained, justified, refined, revised, scrapped, and so on in the giving and asking for reasons we engage in with each other, not only as philosophers but also as sapient beings pursuing any sort of rational inquiry—or the alternative, namely, freewheeling armchair intellectual intuitions (“like a shot from a pistol”<sup>47</sup> of an inspired [post-]romantic genius or enthusiastic spirit-seer agitated by lightning-fast flashes of literary inspiration) about immaterial entities and events testified to by only some experiencers or even beyond any and every possible experience whatsoever? Who indeed thinks dogmatically? Dogmatism, at least in the continental philosophical tradition, is defined through being opposed to Kantian and post-Kantian criticism. In this sense, I am clearly anything but dogmatic.<sup>48</sup>

Harman also complains about me “slowing philosophy to the pace of experimental science.”<sup>49</sup> But philosophy places no premium on speed. If anything, those invested in epistemology and/or (post-)Baconian scientific methodologies understandably and with good reasons tend to be wary of the quick and the immediate. Relatedly, the art of dialectics, for Hegel, demands painful labors of protracted “tarrying”<sup>50</sup> in what Gérard Lebrun fittingly calls the “patience of the concept.”<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Harman’s insinuation that the sciences move slowly in a general or uniform rhythm and routine is undermined by the very history of these disciplines, especially when this history, with its punctuated equilibrium (to refer to Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould),<sup>52</sup>

is considered in the wake of the labors of such figures as Boris Hessen, Gaston Bachelard, Alexandre Koyré, Thomas Kuhn, Lacan, Louis Althusser, Foucault, and Alain Badiou. Some of Althusser's reflections on the rapport between philosophy and science—reflections that rely heavily upon the French tradition of epistemology and history of science (as represented by Bachelard and Koyré, among others) and which have directly influenced Althusser's student, Badiou, in particular—are pertinent in the present context. Althusser repeatedly observes that leaps into new philosophical paradigms/epochs are made both possible and actual precisely by nothing other than revolutionary developments, often transpiring quite abruptly, within the formal and natural sciences (i.e., Bachelard's "epistemological breaks" and/or Badiou's scientific "events" whose "truths" come to "condition" philosophy). Althusser's favorite examples are ancient Greek philosophy as springing from the formal scientific rupture associated with the proper name "Thales" and early modern philosophy as springing from the natural scientific rupture associated with the proper name "Galileo."<sup>53</sup> As I have noted elsewhere, the neo-rationalist tendencies of Althusser and his fellow French theorists overemphasize Galileo's centrality in the birth of modern science and correspondingly underemphasize to the point of neglecting altogether Francis Bacon's empiricist epistemological and methodological contributions to this birth.<sup>54</sup> Remedying this neglect means that, with Bacon as the grandfather of British empiricism, the philosophical explosion of German Idealism beginning at the end of the eighteenth century with Kant's awakening from the dogmatic slumber of his Leibnizian-Wolffian rationalism thanks to one of Bacon's empiricist descendants plausibly can be construed as another philosophical effect made possible by the early seventeenth-century inauguration of scientific modernity.<sup>55</sup>

To speak using the combined vocabularies of some of the thinkers mentioned in the previous paragraph, I am faithful to the historical and dialectical materialisms of Marx and Friedrich Engels that are dear to Althusser too. In this fidelity, I believe that another philosophical (materialist) revolution, one already under way but far from completed and securely consolidated, is demanded by the implications and consequences of epistemological breaks in the life sciences such as those that I have labeled "the Darwin-event" (itself already recognized by Marx and Engels)<sup>56</sup> and "the Hebb-event."<sup>57</sup> Transcendental materialism is, in part, a position in philosophy conditioned by these very events (with my materialism thinking them in their "compossibility" [Badiou] with other events,<sup>58</sup> such as those linked to the names of Marx and Freud). For Badiou, a philosophical revolution is called for on the basis of events in mathematics (tied to Georg Cantor and Paul Cohen especially). For me,

a somewhat different philosophical revolution is called for on the basis of events in biology. But a thesis shared in common between Badiou and me here is that philosophy, whether as regards mathematics or biology, has fallen behind scientific advances that have outpaced it in their rapid sprints forward since the nineteenth century.<sup>59</sup>

Contrary to Harman, it is philosophy that has been slow in comparison with science. And, in line with both Althusser and Badiou, repeatedly opening and exposing philosophy to the ruptures of eventual breaks in the sciences (be they formal or natural) does anything but retard philosophy. On the contrary, scientific conditioning of it can and does, in certain instances, both disrupt philosophical complacency and inertia as well as accelerate philosophy to the point of its swift and radical transformation.<sup>60</sup> Althusser goes so far as to maintain not only that “the relation between philosophy and the sciences constitutes the *specific* determination of philosophy,” but even that “*outside of its relationship to the sciences, philosophy would not exist.*”<sup>61</sup>

In terms of speed, the speculation of the “speculative realism” with which OOO associates itself is simultaneously too slow and too fast, a sort of both-are-worse convergence of opposites. On the one hand, it lags behind such scientific ruptures as the above-mentioned Darwin- and Hebb-events. On the other hand, this sort of speculation, unchecked by the frictions provided by the empirical contents of the natural sciences as well as the empiricist dimensions of philosophical critique as per German Idealism(s), abruptly shoots off in two directions at once, instantaneously falling short of Kant’s “Copernican revolution” and simultaneously overshooting the current limits of present-best knowledge about the nonhuman Real.

By no means whatsoever do I advocate collapsing philosophy (and/or psychoanalysis) into science. Not only do the sciences always already presuppose nonempirical epistemological and ontological frameworks, but their own further development as well as explorations of their extra-scientific reverberations depend upon some of the sorts of speculative imaginings that are paradigmatically exercised by philosophy.<sup>62</sup> However, to paraphrase Lenin, such philosophical extrapolations should be a few steps ahead, but a few steps only, of the sciences.

## Notes

1. Graham Harman, “Johnston’s Materialist Critique of Meillassoux,” *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious* (2014): 29–48.
2. Graham Harman and Adrian Johnston, “Psychoanalysis and Specula-



tive Realism,” Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture, State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, New York, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWkfHdQs4jY>.

3. Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume One: The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 129–209.

4. Adrian Johnston, “Confession of a Weak Reductionist: Responses to Some Recent Criticisms of My Materialism,” in *Neuroscience and Critique: Exploring the Limits of the Neurological Turn*, ed. Jan De Vos and Ed Pluth (New York: Routledge, 2015), 141–70.

5. Ed Pluth, “On Transcendental Materialism and the Natural Real,” *Filozofski Vestnik* 33, no. 2 (2012): 109.

6. See, for instance, Harman and Johnston, “Psychoanalysis and Speculative Realism”; Graham Harman, “DeLanda’s Ontology: Assemblage and Realism,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 41, no. 3 (2008): 369; and Graham Harman, “Foreword,” in Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto of New Realism*, trans. Sarah De Sanctis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), x.

7. Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2004), 96–97.

8. *Ibid.*, 97.

9. See Slavoj Žižek, “Postface: Georg Lukács as the Philosopher of Leninism,” in Georg Lukács, *A Defense of “History and Class Consciousness”: Tailism and the Dialectic*, trans. Esther Leslie (New York: Verso, 2000), 179–80; Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin’s Choice,” in V. I. Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2002), 178–81; Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 168; Žižek, “An Answer to Two Questions,” in Badiou, Žižek, and *Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*, by Adrian Johnston (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 214; Žižek, “The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity,” in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 97, 100; Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 642–44, 646–47, 905–9; and Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2014), 1.

10. For Hegel’s iconic claim that “everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*,” see *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10.

11. See Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” trans. S. Ryazanskaya, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 156–58. For further elaboration on this point, see Adrian Johnston, “Points of Forced Freedom: Eleven (More) Theses on Materialism,” *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism*, no. 4 (2013): 91–99; Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*, 176; and Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 6, 18–19, 30, 77–78, 102, 116, 315–16.

12. See Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 38–41; Johnston, “Confession of a Weak Reductionist,” 146–49.
13. Lorenzo Chiesa, *The Not-Two: Logic and God in Lacan* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016), 185.
14. See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993), 706, 709.
15. Sigmund Freud, “The Resistances to Psycho-Analysis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 19 (London: Hogarth, 1961), 211–24; Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
16. Jan De Vos, “Which Materialism? Questioning the Matrix of Psychology, Neurology, Psychoanalysis, and Ideology Critique,” *Theory and Psychology* 24, no. 1 (2014): 89; Harman, “Johnston’s Materialist Critique of Meillassoux,” 36.
17. De Vos, “Which Materialism?” 82.
18. Chiesa, *The Not-Two*, 185.
19. Adrian Johnston, “Misfelt Feelings: Unconscious Affect between Psychoanalysis, Neuroscience, and Philosophy,” in *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience*, by Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 75–210.
20. Chiesa, *The Not-Two*, 71–72.
21. See Adrian Johnston, “On Deep History and Lacan,” in *Lacan and Philosophy: The New Generation*, ed. Lorenzo Chiesa (Melbourne: re.press, 2014), 63–83.
22. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 105.
23. Johnston, “Misfelt Feelings,” 192.
24. De Vos, “Which Materialism?” 86–89.
25. Chiesa, *The Not-Two*, 34, 69–73.
26. Ed Pluth, “The Black Sheep of Materialism: The Theory of the Subject,” in *Badiou and Philosophy*, ed. Sean Bowden and Simon Duffy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 111–12.
27. De Vos, “Which Materialism?” 81–83, 85–87.
28. *Ibid.*, 90.
29. Adrian Johnston, “From Scientific Socialism to Socialist Science: *Natur-dialektik* Then and Now,” in *The Idea of Communism 2: The New York Conference*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2013), 103–36; “An Interview with Adrian Johnston on Transcendental Materialism (with Peter Gratton),” *Society & Space*, October 7, 2013, <https://societyandspace.org/2013/10/07/on-4/>.
30. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1, 17–19, 24–25, 37, 83, 105; and Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1, 4–6, 14, 24, 26, 31, 35, 38–39, 50–51, 69–70, 87–88.
31. See Johnston, “Misfelt Feelings,” 192–94.
32. See Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 26, 122.

33. See Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), 440.
34. On this point, see Adrian Johnston, "Reflections of a Rotten Nature: Hegel, Lacan, and Material Negativity," *Filozofski Vestnik* 33, no. 2 (2012): 23–52; and Johnston, "Drive between Brain and Subject: An Immanent Critique of Lacanian Neuro-Psychoanalysis," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51 (2013): 48–84.
35. See Harman, "Johnston's Materialist Critique of Meillassoux," 37.
36. *Ibid.*, 37.
37. *Ibid.*, 33, 36.
38. See Adrian Johnston, "Second Natures in Dappled Worlds: John McDowell, Nancy Cartwright, and Hegelian-Lacanian Materialism," *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious* (2011): 71–91.
39. For a further articulation of this point, see Adrian Johnston, "The Voiding of Weak Nature: The Transcendental Materialist Kernels of Hegel's *Naturphilosophie*," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 33, no. 1 (2012): 103–57; Johnston, "Where to Start? Robert Pippin, Slavoj Žižek, and the True Beginning(s) of Hegel's System," *Crisis and Critique* 1, no. 3 (2014): 371–418; Johnston, "Transcendentalism in Hegel's Wake," 204–37; and Johnston, *A New German Idealism: Hegel, Žižek, and Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
40. Graham Harman, *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2016), 29–32.
41. Harman, "Johnston's Materialist Critique of Meillassoux," 45.
42. See Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*, 131–209.
43. Harman, "Johnston's Materialist Critique of Meillassoux," 37.
44. For further elaboration on this point, see Adrian Johnston, "Repeating Engels: Renewing the Cause of the Materialist Wager for the Twenty-First Century," *Theory @ Buffalo* 15 (2011): 163–67; and Johnston, "Points of Forced Freedom," 92–93.
45. See Adrian Johnston, "The Weakness of Nature: Hegel, Freud, Lacan, and Negativity Materialized," in *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, and Creston Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 159–79; Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*, 13–38.
46. Harman, "Johnston's Materialist Critique of Meillassoux," 45.
47. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 16.
48. For further elaboration on this point, see Johnston, "Points of Forced Freedom," 91–98.
49. Harman, "Johnston's Materialist Critique of Meillassoux," 45.
50. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 19.
51. Gérard Lebrun, *La Patience du concept: Essai sur le discours hégélien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).
52. Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould, "Punctuated Equilibria: The Tempo and Mode of Evolution Reconsidered," in *Models in Paleobiology*, ed. Thomas J. M. Schopf (San Francisco: Freeman Cooper, 1972), 82–115; Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, 154–56.
53. See Louis Althusser, "The Object of *Capital*," in Louis Althusser and

Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2009), 205; Althusser, "To My English Readers," in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2005), 14; Althusser, "Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle," trans. James H. Kavanagh, in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, ed. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 1990), 10; Althusser, "Du côté de la philosophie (cinquième Cours de philosophie pour scientifiques)," in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, Tome II*, ed. François Matheron (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1995), 257–60; and Althusser, "Notes sur la philosophie," in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, Tome II*, 301, 306, 318, 323–24.

54. See Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*, 6, 146–47.

55. Apart from David Hume's eye-opening influence on Kant, there is also, obviously, Isaac Newton's profound impact on Kantian theoretical philosophy.

56. See Karl Marx, "Letter to Ferdinand Lassalle, January 16th, 1861," [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1861/letters/61\\_01\\_16.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1861/letters/61_01_16.htm); Marx, "Letter to Friedrich Engels, December 7th, 1867," [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867/letters/67\\_12\\_07.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867/letters/67_12_07.htm); Friedrich Engels, "Letter to Karl Marx, December 11th or 12th, 1859," [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/letters/59\\_12\\_11.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/letters/59_12_11.htm); Engels, "Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx," March 17th, 1883, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm>; and Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, trans. C. P. Dutt (New York: International Publishers, 1941), 25–27.

57. See Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*, 8, 76, 81–107, 178–79, 190–91; Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, 17, 24–25, 159; and Johnston, "Marx's Bones: Breaking with Althusser," in *The Concept in Crisis: Reading Capital Now*, ed. Nick Nesbitt (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017), 189–215.

58. Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 37–39; and Badiou, "L'Entretien de Bruxelles," *Les Temps Modernes* 526 (1990): 25–26.

59. See Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*, 82–83, 104, 106–7; and Johnston, "Repeating Engels," 168–78.

60. For further elaboration on this point, see Johnston, "Points of Forced Freedom," 97–98.

61. Louis Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, trans. Warren Montag, in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, 108, 109.

62. For further elaboration on this point, see Johnston, "Points of Forced Freedom," 91–92; Johnston, "Confession of a Weak Reductionist," 161, 164–67.

# Ontology and the Death Drive: Lacan and Deleuze

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In the beginning of his famous essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Freud introduces the problem of the compulsion to repeat, thus opening up one of the most interesting as well as most controversial conceptual chapters in psychoanalysis, summed up by the hypothesis of the so-called death drive. Freud proposes a range of different examples. We come across people, he writes, all of whose human relationships have the same outcome: the benefactor who is abandoned in anger after a time by each of his protégés, however much they may otherwise differ from one another; or the man whose friendships all end in betrayal by his friend; or the man who, time after time in the course of his life, raises someone else to a position of great private or public authority and then, after a certain interval, himself overthrows that authority and replaces him with a new one; or the lover, each of whose love affairs passes through the same phases and reaches the same outcome. There is also the case that became notorious under the name of *fort-da* (gone–here)—the words used by a small child playing with a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it, repeatedly casting it away and pulling it back to himself. Even more intriguing are the cases where the subject seems to have a *passive* experience over which he has no influence, but in which he encounters a repetition of the same fatality. There is the case of the woman who married three successive husbands, each of whom fell ill soon afterward and had to be nursed by her on his deathbed. Even at the level of dreams, which are supposedly fully governed by the pleasure principle and guided by “wish fulfillment,” psychoanalysis has discovered a surprising compulsion to repeat some particularly traumatic incidents.

The basic problem presented to psychoanalysis by the compulsion to repeat is therefore as follows: if one starts—as Freud does—from the primary character of the pleasure principle, which aims at the maximization of pleasure (and where pleasure is defined as a “*lowering of tension*”) or minimizing of displeasure, then the phenomena of the compulsion to

repeat contradict this framework. Why would somebody be compelled to repeat a distinctly unpleasant experience?

Two divergent accounts of the mechanisms and the logics of the repetition can be discerned already in Freud. According to the first, what we find at the origin of repetition is a repression of a traumatic event: repetition appears at the place of remembering; one repeats something one cannot remember. Repetition is thus fundamentally the repetition (in different “disguises”) of a concrete, originally traumatic event or experience. Although Freud preserved the basic outline of this explanation, he also saw that it nevertheless leaves several problems and questions unanswered, and he kept returning to these questions. Practically all interesting and productive readings of Freud on this issue emphasize the necessity of another turn which complicates the schema above and puts repetition in a new perspective. Despite some important differences, these readings all agree on one point, which has recently been made again by Ray Brassier in the context of his take on negativity and nihilism: what the compulsion to repeat repeats is not some traumatic and hence repressed experience, but something which *could never register as an experience to begin with*. The trauma that is being repeated is outside the horizon of experience (and is, rather, constitutive of it). This emphasis is absolutely crucial: the trauma is real, but not experienced. And this shifts the debate from the usual framework, which is mostly consumed by the question (or alternative) of the real versus the imagined (fantasized); that is, by the distinction between material reality and psychic reality (fantasy).<sup>1</sup>

Brassier bases his reading on precisely that part of “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” where Freud discusses the death drive in relation to the “return to the inanimate.” Since Freud also emphasizes, in a realist manner, that inanimate things existed before living ones, the inorganic, as the “initial state” and “aim” of life, cannot simply be understood as a condition internal to the development of life. Just as the reality of the inorganic is not merely a function of the existence of the organic, the reality of the death drive is not merely a function of life’s past, or of its future.

Thus, the repetition which is driven by death does not repeat the latter as though it were an earlier state of affairs experienced by life or consciousness, for the trauma which drives repetition is precisely what cannot be lived or consciously apprehended. Though trauma is real, its reality cannot be calibrated by the life of organism, just as it cannot be commensurate with the resources of consciousness. It can only be registered as a dysfunction of the organism, or as an interruption of consciousness, and it is this dysfunction and this interruption that is repeated. Accordingly, it is because the “originary” traumatic occur-

rence was only ever registered in the unconscious, rather than experienced, that there is a compulsion to (re-)experience it. But it can only be re-experienced as something that was neither lived nor experienced, since trauma marks the obliteration of life and experience. Nevertheless, the fact that experience cannot obliterate itself points to the reality of trauma, which cannot simply be constructed as a function of experience.<sup>2</sup>

Fundamentally “traumatic experience” is precisely not an experience, but rather something (a negativity or “scar”) that comes, so to speak, as built into the very conditions of our experience and constitutes the condition of our consequently experiencing something as “traumatic” (in the strong sense of the word).<sup>3</sup> The objectivity of trauma (its independence of our “psychic life”) is the very condition of our having a “psychic life” (and experiencing something as “traumatic”). This is an important point in relation to Catherine Malabou’s criticism of psychoanalysis, according to which psychoanalysis cannot conceive of the trauma as real, but only as (necessarily) psychologically mediated.<sup>4</sup> The simplest response to this critique is that if all trauma is “psychologically mediated,” it is precisely because this very *mediation* “comes from the outside,” that is, it relates to a Real independent of ourselves. Mediation is not a screen separating us from the Real, but is itself partaking in this Real. We could also say: mediation is the trauma (trauma as real). Wounds that are not traumatic in the psychological sense but simply and directly damage our brain or body exist, of course; yet the question of whether a certain wound will also function as “traumatic” (in the psychological sense) depends on another “wound” that is, strictly speaking, outside our experience (starting with our physical experience) because it is one with the constitution of experience.

To return to Brassier, he further substantiates his reading of “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” by referring to a passage in which Freud ventures into intriguing speculations about the genesis of organic individuation. According to these Freudian speculations, a primitive organic vesicle (that is, a small bladder, cell, bobble, or hollow structure) becomes capable of filtering the continuous and potentially lethal torrent of external stimuli by sacrificing part of itself in order to erect a protective shield against excessive influxes of excitation. In so doing, it effects a definitive separation between organic interiority and inorganic exteriority. The separation between the organic inside and the inorganic outside is thus achieved at the price of the death of part of the primitive organism itself. As Brassier puts it:

Thus, individuated organic life is won at the cost of this aboriginal death whereby the organism first becomes capable of separating itself from the inorganic outside. This death, which gives birth to organic individuation, thereby conditions the possibility of organic phylogenesis, as well as of sexual reproduction. Consequently, not only does this death precede the organism, it is the precondition for the organism's ability to reproduce and die. If the death drive *qua* compulsion to repeat is the originary, primordial motive force driving organic life, this is because the motor of repetition—the repeating instance—is this trace of the aboriginal trauma of organic individuation. . . . The death drive is the trace of this scission: a scission that will never be successfully *bound* (invested) because it remains the *unbindable* excess that makes binding possible.<sup>5</sup>

This is a crucial point, and we shall return to it. It isolates a third element in relation to the distinction between life and death (organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate), and “locates” the death drive in this element. There is death which is the opposite of life, but there is also death which preconditions this very opposition and is presupposed by it. In other words, the death drive is out of joint both in relation to life and in relation to death. It is not an obscure will to return to the inanimate; rather, it is a trace of a trauma that cannot be *experienced* as such because it is prior to any experience. It is a primordial loss (“minus”) which precisely was not capable of being perceived (experienced) as a loss—and in this sense there is nothing “psychological” about this trauma. Let us recall that Freud's original “deduction” of the death drive actually involves a similar configuration: the passage from the inanimate to life involves a loss (of homeostatic state), yet there is nothing (nobody) that could *experience* this loss as a loss. When life comes to life, it is already constituted on the loss of the homeostatic state (of the inanimate); it never lives through this loss. From this perspective, which Freud does not make explicit, there is a loss at the origin of the death drive that could never have been experienced as loss. Only from this perspective can it make any sense to say that “life wants to *return* to the inanimate”; for, strictly speaking, it is only (the interrupted) inanimate that could be said to want to return to the inanimate (as a state it once knew). Life, on the other hand, has nowhere to return to except, precisely, to that which it never had yet nevertheless lost. That is to say: life has nowhere to return to except that with the lack of which (as built in) it has come to life.

Yet, this important emphasis notwithstanding, Brassier's reading still remains within the classic Freudian schema which posits the plea-



sure principle (*qua* lowering of tension) as the primary principle. In Brassier's genuinely Freudian reading, the compulsion to repeat is in the service of mastering the unbound excess (of excitation) related to the aboriginal trauma, even though the latter could not have been *experienced* as such. The compulsive repetition is thus explained as the mechanism through which "the psyche is striving to muster the anxiety required in order to achieve a successful binding [*Besetzung*] of the excess of excitation released by the traumatic breaching of its defenses. It is this binding that lies 'beyond the pleasure principle.'" <sup>6</sup> In other words: when the usual mechanisms of defense (including repression)—which can still master the excessive excitement within the register of the pleasure principle—no longer work, anxiety is brought in as a last resort in order to perform this work of binding, which in this case takes place "beyond the pleasure principle." And the role of the compulsive repetition (of an unpleasant experience) is to give rise to this anxiety. In spite of its unpleasant character, anxiety is still a defense (against an even bigger displeasure), and the repetition providing this drastic defense is ultimately still in the service of the pleasure principle *qua* lowering of tension—it is a paradoxical extension of the pleasure principle itself. And so, then, is the death drive. If not, one would need to distinguish between the death drive as such, and the *compulsion to repeat* this or that (empirical) traumatic experience. In short, one would need to clearly separate the death drive from repetition. What suggests a move in this last direction in Brassier's work is that he is led to separate the repetition itself from the excess of excitation and to put them, so to speak, on two opposite sides: the excess (or the death drive) is the trace of the aboriginal trauma prior to any experience, and the compulsion to repeat an empirically traumatic experience is a *means* of awakening anxiety in order to master and "bind" the excess. But this would then imply that the (death) drive itself is not intrinsically related to repetition. <sup>7</sup>

These considerations and difficulties could be a good starting point from which to look at the perhaps surprising proximity between Lacan and Deleuze in their readings of Freud on these questions, which will then bring us to examine the relationship between their respective ontologies.

In relation to Freud, both Lacan and Deleuze, first, vigorously reject the thesis according to which the pleasure principle, conceived as the principle of "lowering tension," constitutes a fundamental, primary principle, and, second, insist that there is a direct connection between the "erring/unbound excess" and repetition. As to the first point, they reject the hypothesis of two competing principles (pleasure as "Eros" and death drive as "Thanatos"), as well as the possibility of relating the death drive to a homeostatic tendency ("return to the inanimate") and hence

its subjection—in the last instance—to the pleasure principle as primary. This last emphasis and the ontological primacy of the death drive it implies, which is not so surprising in the case of Lacan, is certainly much more so in the case of the allegedly “vitalist” Deleuze.

In the introductory part of *Difference and Repetition*, where he develops one of the most philosophically interesting interpretations of the death drive to date, Deleuze explicitly suggests that the death drive “is the transcendental principle, whereas the pleasure principle is only psychological.”<sup>8</sup> Or: “Eros and Thanatos are distinguished in that Eros must be repeated, can be lived only through repetition, whereas Thanatos (as transcendental principle) is that which gives repetition to Eros.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, Eros is but part of the logic (of the appearing) of Thanatos or of the death drive, and does not have the status of another, complementary (let alone primary) principle. The death drive is the fundamental (and only) principle, and it has nothing to do with any kind of lowering of tension or “return to nirvana.”

Although he does not go in the Kantian direction suggested by Deleuze (positing the death drive as “transcendental”), Lacan argues against the duality of the drives in a very similar way, claiming that “every drive is virtually a death drive.”<sup>10</sup> He also argues against what he takes to be a remainder of Aristotelian metaphysics in Freud. He thus scorns the idea of “backing the primary process up with the principle which, if pleasure were its only claim, would demonstrate nothing, save that we cling to the soul like a tick to a dog’s hide. Because what else is the famous lowering of tension with which Freud links pleasure, other than the ethics of Aristotle?”<sup>11</sup>

The idea of the primary principle as that of “lowering tension” is perceived by both Lacan and Deleuze as the heritage of certain philosophical metaphysics, including a “spontaneous metaphysics” of science, to which Freud was not immune, although he was the first to point out things that undermine this spontaneous metaphysics most damagingly. In this precise sense, Lacan’s and Deleuze’s “modification” of Freud on this point is actually closer to the spirit of Freud himself, to his crucial findings and insights, than the simple acceptance of the claim about an original tendency to lower tension would have been.

But what, then, is the death drive (and its primacy) that Deleuze and Lacan are speaking about? It is certainly not the primacy of some obscure *will* or tendency to aggression, destruction, death. Deleuze, who embraced the concept of the death drive because of its inherent link with repetition, sees in repetition nothing less than the very place of original *affirmation*. This is why, for him, the true question is: “How is it that the theme of death, which appears to draw together the most nega-

tive elements of psychological life, can be in itself the most positive element, transcendently positive, to the point of affirming repetition?"<sup>12</sup> The death drive is decidedly not about destruction and death; on the contrary, it is a complex notion that one needs to think if one wants to posit *affirmation* in terms different from those denounced by Nietzsche as those of an ass saying "yes" (Yea-Yuh) all the time and to everything. For Deleuze, the death drive is a prerogative of true affirmation, insofar as the latter is in itself "*selective*," and is not a simple (and stupid) opposite of negativity. As for Lacan, he relates—in the famous passage from Seminar XI in which he introduces the figure of the "lamella"—the death drive to what he calls the "indestructible life."<sup>13</sup> Lacan and Deleuze thus both suggest that the death drive cannot be thought in terms of the simple opposition between life and death, because it is precisely what belies this opposition and (re)configures it in the first place.

The other crucial point shared by Lacan and Deleuze concerns the relation between the erratic "wandering excess" (unbound surplus excitation) and repetition. Both insist that the excess (of excitation) does not exist somewhere independently of (and prior to) repetition, but only and precisely in and through repetition itself. Repetition is not simply a means designed to arouse an anxiety capable of binding the unbound excess (related to the aboriginal trauma). It is also, and paradoxically, that which "produces" or brings about the excess "bound" by anxiety through repetition. The excess of excitation exists only through repetition which strives to bind it, and hence points to a *split at the very heart of repetition itself*. This is probably the most difficult, but also the most important, aspect of Lacan's and Deleuze's concept of repetition as related to the death drive and to surplus excitation.

In Deleuze's work, this paradox is accounted for by his complex ontology in which repetition itself is two-sided. With every empirical, concrete repetition something else is at stake (and repeated) as well, namely, difference as such, *pure difference*. Repetition does not only repeat something (an "object"), it also repeats difference as such. Pure difference repeats itself with every individual difference, and it is only through and in relation to this repetition as pure difference that the things exist which we can describe as different, similar, or the same.<sup>14</sup> This is why one should not understand repetition solely in the narrow sense of repeating an identical configuration, but as something no less at work in the colorful variety of differences. The point is that "something" (namely, pure difference) can be repeated in very different forms, while it does not exist somewhere outside and independently of these forms. It has no independent existence, yet at the same time it is not simply reducible to the elements which it repeats. It is their inherent and constitutive differ-

ence. Or, in a longer but crucial passage from Deleuze, which also directly relates repetition to the death drive:

Death has nothing to do with a material model. On the contrary, the death instinct may be understood in relation to masks and costumes. Repetition is truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself. It is not underneath the masks, but is formed from one mask to another, as though from one distinctive point to another, from one privileged instant to another, with and within the variations. The masks do not hide anything except other masks. There is no first term which is repeated. . . . There is no bare repetition which may be abstracted or inferred from the disguise itself. The same thing is both disguising and disguised. A decisive moment in psychoanalysis occurred when Freud gave up, in certain respects, the hypothesis of real childhood events, which would have played the part of ultimate disguised terms, in order to substitute the power of fantasy which is immersed in the death instinct, where everything is already masked and disguised. In short, repetition is in its essence symbolic; symbols or simulacra are the letter of repetition itself. Difference is included in repetition by way of disguise and by the order of the symbol.<sup>15</sup>

The second half of this passage (following the ellipses) constitutes the Deleuzian version of the claim made by Brassier: that there is no experienced traumatic *original* of repetition. What is repeated is not some traumatic, and hence repressed, *original* experience. Deleuze pushes this even further by rejecting any kind of causality leading *to* repetition, and positing repetition as an absolute beginning. This leads him to directly reverse the Freudian claim, and to say: “We do not repeat because we repress, we repress because we repeat. Moreover—which amounts to the same thing—we do not disguise because we repress, we repress because we disguise, and we disguise by virtue of the determinant center of repetition.”<sup>16</sup> The traumatic surplus is produced only *in* and *by* repetition; if anything, repetition (and the excess or surplus object it necessarily introduces) is the cause of repression, not the other way around.

We must also be attentive to Deleuze’s wording throughout this passage, which is very precise. The point is not simply that all that exists are masks/appearances/disguises *and nothing else*. The point is that (1) there is no substance that would repeat itself in different disguises and could be deciphered as such, pointed out and separated from them; and (2) *there* is something besides the masks, yet the ontological status of this something is paradoxical: we are dealing here with something that only exists in the repetition of different masks and which calls for redoubling in its formu-

lation ("The same thing is both disguising and disguised"). Moreover, not only does that which is repeated exist only through the "masks" with which it is repeated, but these masks themselves exist only (and literally) through what they repeat: "The masks or costumes, do not come 'over and above': they are, on the contrary, the internal genetic elements of repetition itself, its integral and constituent parts."<sup>17</sup> Here, then, are the two sides of repetition.

In Lacan, a similar inherent split could be established between two levels of the drive: drives as involved in all kinds of partial satisfactions, following the well-known list (oral, anal, scopic), and the drive as purely disruptive pulsating negativity that propels them. In Seminar XI, for example, he emphasizes the difference between *objet a* as marking a negativity (loss or gap) as such around which the drive circulates, and all forms of *objets a*, which "are merely its representatives, its figures," and which constitute different partial drives.<sup>18</sup> As in Deleuze, these two levels cannot be separated. The death drive does not exist somewhere independently of these multiple figures, but only with them and through them. This also means that the supposedly original chaotic, fragmented (empirical) multiplicity of the drives is already a *result* of some "unifying" negativity—as opposed to the rather romantic and much too simplistic idea about an original chaotic freedom of the drives.<sup>19</sup> However, this fundamental negativity is "unifying" in a very specific sense which, again, bears some surprising resemblance to the Deleuzian notion of "univocity."

In Deleuze, the notion of the univocity of being is directly linked to the singular and central relation between two levels of difference involved in repetition:

We must show not only how individuating difference differs in kind from specific difference, but primarily and above all how individuation properly *precedes* matter and form, species and parts, and every other element of the constituted individual. Univocity of being, in so far as it is immediately related to difference, demands that we show how individuating difference precedes generic, specific and even individual differences within being; how a prior field of individuation within being conditions at once the determination of species of forms, the determination of parts and their individual variations. If individuation does not take place either by form or by matter, neither qualitatively nor extensionally, this is not only because it differs in kind but because it is already presupposed by the forms, matters and extensive parts.<sup>20</sup>

This is a very dense passage. It invokes, among other things, the very beginning of metaphysics and the whole discussion by Aristotle (in book 7 of the *Metaphysics*) of what is *being qua being*, where Aristotle attempts

to decide whether this title should go to matter or to form. What makes him eventually decide that the title doesn't belong to his first candidate, which is the formless matter of which everything is ultimately composed, but to form is precisely the question of individuation. He very briskly concludes that substance must be "separate" (*chôriston*) and "some this" (*tode ti*, sometimes translated as "this something"), and—implying that matter fails to meet this requirement—the title goes to the form. Precisely what the requirement amounts to is still a matter of considerable scholarly debate. Yet one can plausibly say that it concerns the question of (a certain type of) individuation. And this is precisely the point (or the "symptom") to which both Lacan and Deleuze respond with the argument that could be most concisely put in the following terms: Aristotle fails to distinguish between "difference" and "differentiating difference," and hence between two levels of individuation: one that can be seen as separate individual entities, and the one that only makes it possible for the latter to appear (or to count) as such. In his discussion of the ontological status and presuppositions of a *one* (as unit) in Seminar XIX, . . . or *Worse*, Lacan points out that "Aristotelian logic is grounded on the intuition of the individual that Aristotle posits as real."<sup>21</sup> This means that, in a nominalist way, Aristotle takes empirical individuation (difference) as the foundation of the notion of One. In relation to this, Lacan does not simply embrace a realist ("Platonic") stance according to which One would exist as such (the idea of One would precede any empirical oneness). Instead, by drawing strongly on contemporary mathematical logic and set theory, he proposes his own way of thinking the difference and the relationship between two levels of individuation, and comes up with formulations that are strongly consonant with Deleuze's. The One of individuation can only be founded on pure difference; it "comes from" a negativity that is repeated in (and with) any countable one. "One cannot be grounded on sameness. On the contrary, it has been marked out, by set theory, as having to be grounded on pure and simple difference."<sup>22</sup>

The way Lacan reads the notion of the "empty set" in modern mathematics echoes, almost word by word, the Deleuzean construction of the individuating difference as prior to all countable differences, while being at the same time involved (as repeated) in each one of them. It is not that we have, say, first an empty set, then a set with one element, a set with two elements, and so on. The empty set appears only through its repetition, for—mathematically—it is already a set with one "element" (this element being the empty set). The constitutive emptiness does not exist without the One with which it appears the first time (although it is not reducible to it) and, on the other hand, this One "comes from" the empty set which it repeats.

"Emptiness," "hole," and "radical difference" are posited by Lacan

at the core of repetition as constituting/generating what *there is*, and what is countable. This is the “unifying negativity” which is always the “same” only in so far as it is absolutely singular, *alone* (*un seul*). This also applies to Deleuze. Although borrowing the notion of univocity (of being) from Duns Scotus and Spinoza, Deleuze nevertheless modifies it at a crucial point: we are not dealing with a configuration in which being or substance is One, and everything that exists is a modification of this One-Substance. Deleuze’s claim is not that “being is One,” but that being is difference, which is one (alone), *singular*. The accent is on there being only one, *single* Difference, and not on the difference forming a One. This single, pure Difference is repeating itself with different entities, different “ones” (and their differences), constituting them in this way, and constituting itself in this repetition.

Deleuze has two magisterial concepts with which he thinks the fundamental negativity at stake here: difference (the radical, individuating difference as conceptualized in *Difference and Repetition*) and the “crack,” *fêlure*, which plays a significant role in *The Logic of Sense*. Unsurprisingly, both are discussed by Deleuze as directly related to the death drive. He famously introduces the concept of the crack (*fêlure*) in relation to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s essay collection *The Crack-Up* (translated in French as *La fêlure*), making a proper concept out of it, and developing it more extensively in his discussion of Zola that concludes—a significant positioning—*The Logic of Sense*. Deleuze takes as his starting point the following extraordinary passage from Zola’s *La Bête humaine*:

The family was really not quite normal, and many of them had some flaw [*fêlure*]. At certain times, he could clearly feel this hereditary taint [*fêlure*], not that his health was bad, for it was only nervousness and shame about his attacks that made him lose weight in his early days. But there were attacks of instability in his being, losses of equilibrium like cracks [*cassures*] or holes from which his personality seemed to leak away, amid a sort of thick vapor that deformed everything.<sup>23</sup>

Deleuze first carefully stresses that the crack does not designate the route along which morbid ancestral elements will pass, marking the body. “Heredité is not that which passes through the crack, it is the crack itself—the *imperceptible rift or the hole*.”<sup>24</sup> Heredité does not pass through the crack, it is the crack (the rift or the hole). He further distinguishes this “grand,” “epic” heredité from what he calls “small” heredité, which is what we usually mean by this term: the transmission of something determined, transmission as “reproduction” of the same. Although they are in no way reducible to one another, they are very closely related. One way of

conceiving this relation would be (again following Zola) in terms of the relation between the crack and its surroundings. Distributed around the crack are what Zola calls the temperaments, the instincts, the big appetites. Deleuze takes the notion of “instincts” (and their objects) to refer to the corporeal (“empirical”) appearance of the crack<sup>25</sup>—a corporeal appearance without which the crack would remain just a “diffuse potentiality.” He then proposes the following formulation of the relation between the two levels, which directly echoes the way he describes the relation between repetition (as pure difference/being) and its masks (that which appears) in *Difference and Repetition*, as well as much of Lacan’s discussion of the topology of drives:

If it is true that the instincts are formed and find their object only at the edge of the crack, the crack conversely pursues its course, spreads out its web, changes direction and is actualized in each body in relation to the instincts which open a way for it, sometimes mending it a little, sometimes widening it. . . . The two orders are tightly joined together, like a ring within a larger ring, but they are never confused.<sup>26</sup>

Whereas Deleuze arrives at this topology by way of literature, Lacan sketches it with reference to modern mathematics. They can both be said to “force” their references to some extent (Is Zola really saying this? Is mathematics really saying this?) in order to come up with a wording of their own which, again, is often astonishingly similar. Describing the relation between the empty set and the elements that can be counted (as one) and said to exist, Lacan works his way to his principal thesis according to which One (that could be said to be) emerges out of an ontological deficit, a “hole,” posited as primary. Here are some highly suggestive formulations: (countable) One “only begins with its lack”; “One arises as the effect of lack”; “One turns out . . . to be strictly constituted by the place of a lack”; One emerges out of “the entrance porthole that is designated by lack.”<sup>27</sup> As one can see very clearly, the “hole” is not an effect or result of a failed repetition or impossibility; rather, it is itself the impossible. The impossible is precisely what *is* repeated, it is the repetition itself, and it is itself “productive.” The proximity between this “hole” or original lack (the negativity on which the death drive is premised) and the Deleuzian *fêlure* becomes even more striking in the following passage from *The Logic of Sense*.

The crack designates, and this emptiness is, Death—the death instinct. The instincts may speak loud, make noise, or swarm, but they are unable to cover up this more profound silence, or hide that from which



they come forth and to which they return: the death instinct, *not merely one instinct among others*, but the crack itself around which all the instincts congregate.<sup>28</sup>

This indeed sounds as if it could have come directly from Lacan's Seminar XI.<sup>29</sup> The death instinct (death drive) is not one among the drives, but the very crack around which the drives congregate. (This is why Lacan can say that "every drive is virtually a death drive.") Each partial drive (or its object) is a repetition of this crack—a repetition which, in turn, constitutes this object as object.

This is also very interesting in the context of Lacan's discussion of the relationship between sexuality and the (always) partial drives. Sexuality, considered from a phenomenological point of view, appears to be composed of several different partial drives, to which it provides a more or less accomplished unification. (And this was basically Freud's view of the matter.) What Lacan adds to this—and we are clearly on a speculative level here—is that we could also see sexuation as prior to the partial drives: not as a kind of primary substance, but precisely as a pure negativity, a hole/crack (and in this sense as the Real) around which the drives "congregate" (to use Deleuze's wording). There is no sexual drive: sexuality (as diverse sexual "activity") appears at the point of its own fundamental lack. Taken at this level, sexuality "unifies" the drives not by uniting them in a more or less coherent whole (of sexual activity), but precisely as the crack around which they circulate and to which they keep returning. The "sexual" refers to the "hole" or "crack" shared (and repeated) by different drives. Taken at this level, sexuality is indeed synonymous with the death drive, not opposed to it, as Eros is opposed to Thanatos. It is Thanatos insofar as the latter is, in Deleuzian terms, "that which gives repetition to Eros."<sup>30</sup>

This is also what is usually missed in criticism of the Lacanian take on sexuality and sexual difference: Lacanian psychoanalysis does not promote the (conservative) norm, but exposes the thing that feeds this norm and keeps it in force; this thing is not simply a chaotic multiplicity of the drives, but the "crack in the system." It also maintains that it would be wrong to think that the crack that in-forms human sexuality could simply disappear if we accepted the idea that there is a colorful multiplicity of sexual identities. From the Lacanian perspective, "sexual identity" is a contradiction in terms. The much-criticized psychoanalytic "predilection" for the two (also when it takes the form of the "not-two") comes not from the biology (or anatomy) of sexual reproduction, but from that which, in this reproduction, is missing in biology, *as well as in culture*. Or, in other words, it comes from the fact that copulation is utterly "out of

place . . . in human reality, to which it nevertheless provides sustenance with the fantasies by which that reality is constituted.”<sup>31</sup>

And, perhaps not so surprisingly any more, when he discusses the “crack,” Deleuze also links it to sexuation: as opposed to “*some*” (the somatic cells, the biological cells which form the body of an organism), he writes, “the ‘*germen*’ is the crack—nothing but the crack.”<sup>32</sup> The “*germen*”—that is to say, the germ cells, the elements involved in sexual reproduction—is the very instance of *fêlure*.

It is of course well known how, in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze states emphatically that the motor of repetition is not an impossibility (to repeat); what drives repetition is not a failure, a lack, a deficiency; there is nothing (outside it) that motivates repetition; repetition itself is both primary “motivator” and motor. Yet we must not read this Deleuzian stance against “negativity” and “lack” too hastily. As we have seen in his consideration (and appropriation) of the death drive, things are more complicated and more interesting. The point is, rather, that this singular “negativity” (the crack, the hole) is for him the primary site of affirmation. Repetition is the hole/crack that repeats itself, and in doing so it repeats what is around it and related to it. Or, in other words, repetition is negativity taken in the absolute sense: not negativity in relation to something, but original negativity, negativity that is itself productive of what is there and what can be differentiated, compared, said to fail, and so on. We could also say that he takes this negativity as such to be the original positive force—as opposed to a secondary notion of negativity (and difference). And the whole question now becomes how to eventually separate this “bad” negativity from a “good” one. It is with this question that some more significant differences between Lacan and Deleuze start to appear.

Before looking into this last point, however, we can already discern another important difference here in relation to Lacan concerning the concept of negativity and its Deleuzian “translation” into the most positive *force*. From the Lacanian perspective, *there is* something that “motivates” repetition, and this something is precisely an impossibility—although this needs to be understood in a very precise and specific sense. It does not imply, for example, that something is “impossible to be repeated” in its unique singularity; rather, it implies the *non-being* of what is to be repeated. *It is impossible to repeat it because it is not there* in the usual sense of the term. This is the Lacanian version of the theory that what is repeated is not an original traumatic experience, interrupting whatever has taken place before, but the *interruption itself* (which he relates to the Real). And this brings us to the properly psychoanalytic (Lacanian) concept of the “unbound surplus”: namely, enjoyment. Enjoyment appears at the place

of the nonexistent (“originally missing”) signifier, which—with its very nonexistence—dictates the logic of the signifying chain and “declines it” in a certain way. And it declines it with the help of the enjoyment sticking to (other) signifiers. Enjoyment is the (only) “being,” “substance” of that which is ontologically not, of the missing (“originally repressed”) signifier. And this enjoyment is the “glue” which, *by linking different signifiers in a certain order* (of their association), repeats the original negativity. This, I believe, is also what is implied in Brassier’s insight according to which “the *unbindable* excess [is what] makes binding possible.”

Certain existing signifying connections (symptoms) or signifying complexes (“formations”) are thus not only a disguise under which the original negativity repeats itself; they are also its—more or less fantasmatic, enjoyment-fueled—representations related to the subject of the unconscious. This is to say that—for psychoanalysis—the nexus of representation and enjoyment has to be conceived against the background of an original negativity (call it primal repression, one-less, minus, rift, or crack) as a *third* element in relation to the unbound excess (enjoyment) and the signifiers. Lacan fortifies this rift, this third, with his concept of the Real (and relates it to the point where a “new signifier” could eventually intervene). Deleuze, on the other hand, who also starts out from a similar kind of tripartite topology, tends to make it collapse into a double movement of a One. The rift or crack becomes itself the pure movement of the unbound excess appearing with different signifying masks or “disguises.”

For psychoanalysis, there is thus a difference between the fundamental negativity (a “minus”) and the excessive surplus(-enjoyment) that emerges at its place and repeats the original negativity by linking, “gluing,” the signifiers with which this negativity appears *in a certain order*. For Deleuze, however, the excess/surplus is *directly* the pure productive excess of negativity (crack, Difference) repeating itself in different disguises and with different signifiers or symbols. The original negativity directly *is* the “positive,” “productive” movement or force (“drive”). This is also what the “plane of immanence” basically refers to: “The same thing is both disguising and disguised.” What disappears here—to repeat—is precisely the difference between the original negativity and the surplus that emerges at its place and binds the signifiers in a certain order (which necessarily depends upon contingencies of individual history).

In what Deleuze will call “realized ontology,” all that remains is the Difference itself (pure difference, not a difference between this and that). This Difference is pure being *qua* being in its univocity. And it equals pure *movement*, just as the *fêlure*, the “crack,” is finally not so much a rift as a pure movement or force. This shift from *topological* to *dynamic*

tropes is indeed crucial for Deleuze: the topological noncoincidence of being and appearing, their *rift*, is “liquefied” into Being as a pure *movement* of Difference.

By “liquefying” the difference (noncoincidence) of being and appearing into a pure differentiating movement of Being itself, Deleuze obliterates the Real that keeps repeating itself in this difference. This, at least, would be the Lacanian stance. With the notion of the Real, Lacan gives conceptual support to the rift, the crack, that is implied by yet invisible in the deployment of differences, and repeated with them. He extracts it from its invisibility, claiming that psychoanalysis is in a position to give it some minimal consistency.

Whereas Deleuze moves to ontologize this Real, and makes it the real Being *qua* being, it is essential for Lacan to keep them apart. This Lacanian holding apart of Being and the Real does not imply that Being is not real—the Real is precisely not a predicate. Lacan’s reservations about something like psychoanalytic ontology is well known. He has no wish to develop his own ontology. Yet the reason does not, perhaps, lie in his conviction that ontology is meaningless (after the transcendental turn) and necessarily “metaphysical”; on the contrary. If there is one person who has always refused to consider psychoanalysis as exempt from ontological interrogation, it is Lacan. His point, rather, is that the very notion of ontology (as “the science of being *qua* being”) has to be expanded by an additional concept (the Real) that holds and marks the place of its inherent contradiction/impossibility. And the subject is the effect of this *contradiction*, not an offshoot of being. There is the subject because there is the Real.

This is where Lacan and Deleuze seem to be furthest apart: whereas for Deleuze “realism” implies radical desubjectivation, for Lacan (the effect of) subjectivation is the very instance (or “proof”) of an irreducible Real. In this respect, it is no coincidence that in the “new materialisms,” many of which are based upon Deleuzian foundations, the main philosophical front (the main battlefield) usually lies along the line of the question of the subject.<sup>33</sup> Most of the conceptual propositions related to new materialisms aim both at “getting out of the subject” (the supposed discursive or transcendental cage) and at “getting the subject out” (of the landscape of new ontologies)—or, at least, ascribing it to a not particularly significant local point of this landscape.

The question I would like to raise here is simply this: can there be serious materialism without the subject—that is, without a strong concept of the subject, such as we find, for example, in Lacan? And—in passing—it is significant that even though the new materialisms usually take their starting point in rejecting the “linguistic turn” and all that is

labeled “structuralism” and “poststructuralism,” they actually share with them precisely this conviction according to which the “subject” is a rotten apple in the barrel of philosophical concepts. One reason why Lacan stands out in the context of (post)structuralism is precisely because he does not subscribe to this view. To put it very simply: if language, discourse, or structure were consistent ontological categories, there would be no subject.

But in order to work our way up to these questions, let me start at a simpler point. One of the definitions and images of materialism (as realism) is as follows: contrary to deceptive and groundless ideals and idealizations, materialism exposes the brute reality, reality without embellishments, the material truth or basis of things that seem to stand on their own. Let me borrow an example from Slavoj Žižek: the following quote from Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*.

Like seeing roasted meat and other dishes in front of you and suddenly realizing: This is a dead fish. A dead bird. A dead pig. Or that this noble vintage is grape juice, and the purple robes are sheep wool dyed with shellfish blood. Or making love—something rubbing against your penis, a brief seizure and a little cloudy liquid.

Perceptions like that—latching onto things and piercing through them, so we see what they really are. That’s what we need to do all the time—all through our lives when things lay claim to our trust—to lay them bare and see how pointless they are, to strip away the legend that encrusts them.<sup>34</sup>

In this account, materialism would mean: the reality minus the illusion which accompanies it and keeps transforming it into something quite different. The maneuver described by Marcus Aurelius aims at bursting the bubble of the imaginary and forcing us to face reality such as it is. Žižek adds another example of this strategy, which was supposed to guard (Catholic) men against sins of the flesh: when you are tempted by a voluptuous female body, imagine what it will look like in a couple of decades or, better still, imagine what lurks even now beneath the skin: the raw flesh and bones, bodily fluids, half-digested food and excrement.

In other words, in the pair of the sublime and the gruesome body, the materialist perspective is supposed to be on the side of the gruesome body: the sobering perspective revealing, behind a beautiful and deceptive appearance, the ugly material Real. To the way Žižek convincingly dismantles this perspective I would like to add another possible path toward the same problem: the sheer terms of the description (sublime

versus gruesome) already point to a problem at the heart of this conception. We can expose it in two steps.

1. What is supposed to be the sobering effect of realist materialism points in fact to a crack/gap in this realism itself. Reality “such as it is” (without embellishments) appears in all these configurations—directly or indirectly—as ugly, gruesome. In other words: in order for it to “sober us up” (wake us from the illusion), it has to be perceived as *more* than it is: it has to be invested with a series of quite subjective affects—repugnance, aversion, and the like. In order to get to reality “such as it is,” a (subjective) *surplus* is needed (or produced), a surplus or excess which is precisely not reducible to “reality such as it is.” (The fact that rotting flesh incites affects of disgust, or at least extinguishes our desire immediately, is no less mediated by the window of [our] fantasy than what appears as sublime.)

2. Yet—and this is the second step—this is not to say that contrary to naïve materialism, which strives to discover the naked material reality of things in themselves (but never quite succeeds), we are simply defending the inaccessibility of a thing in itself and its necessary *mediation* by the subjective, which has “always already” taken place. Rather, what is at stake, and what one could argue for, is a different kind of materialism which is precisely not based on the opposition between “naked” reality, stripped of all subjective illusions and investments (reality such as it exists independently of the subject), and an “always already” subjective/subjectivized (or subject-constituted) reality. For this opposition is false or, better, it is not genuinely “materialist.” It is only by working through this excess (and by following its distortions through) that we get to the thing in itself, for this thing in itself is already contradictory.

The thesis, in its simplest form, would be that we should consider the following possibility: if reality appears with an irreducible excess “over” itself, then this excess (or noncoincidence with itself) is not simply or only a subjective distortion, but should also be seen as indicative of a split or contradiction in this reality itself. How can this claim be made in any convincing way? Precisely by arguing for a specific concept of the subject, which starts from shifting the ground of the discussion from the question of affirming or denying the existence of reality independent of the subject, to a different kind of perspective which affirms, and combines, the following two propositions: (1) there is indeed a reality that exists independently of the subject (that is independent of subjective mediation or constitution); (2) the subject (the structure of subjectivity

in the strong sense of the term, in its very excessiveness) is precisely that which gives us access to reality independent of the subject.

If we simply remove the subject and its distortions/excessiveness, we may indeed get a “neutral reality”; actually, we cannot get *anything but* some form of neutrality, and this is where the problem lies. For what if reality is not neutral, but torn by an inherent impossibility and contradiction? Or, more precisely, what if neutrality itself is not “neutral,” but already implies a subjective imposition, a normative “neutralization”? In that case, the subjective excessiveness brings us closer to the truth, as well as to the possibility of engaging with reality’s contradictions.

This is the problem of the realism which operates with the notion of reality such as it is “independently of ourselves.” The problem is not simply that we can never exempt ourselves from the reality of which we are part, and that we cannot reflexively subtract our distortion and in this way obtain a pure, independent reality. The problem is deeper and much more fundamental: reality as it is independently of ourselves appears (comes into view) only “dependently on us” *as subjects*—not in the sense of being caused or constituted by us, but in the sense that reality’s own inherent negativity/contradiction appears as part of this reality precisely in the form of the subject. (Apart from other things) the subject is an *objective* embodiment of reality’s contradiction. This, I think, would be the gist of Lacan’s materialism: of course I am determined, as a subject, by things that exist independently of me; yet the subjective position, or subjectivation, is not only a concrete and singular way in which things determine me, but is also and at the same time the subjectivation of a paradox/contradiction involved in the very things that determine me (this paradox/contradiction exists “in itself” only as this objectivation-subjectivation, or objectivation via the subject).

What this implies could be formulated as follows: we get to certain aspects of objective reality only by insisting on the irreducibility of the subject. And not, for example, by a hasty, precipitate objectivation of the subject itself, as we find, for example, in the materialism involved in some versions of object-oriented ontology, positing that the subject is simply just another object—an object among other objects, with its own specific characteristics.<sup>35</sup> If the subject were simply one object among others, there would be no need for the concept of the subject (in the strong philosophical and psychoanalytic sense); the term “person” (or “human being”) would suffice. The subject names an object that is precisely *not* just an object among others—this is the whole point, and there is no need for this statement to provoke in us an immediate attack of self-limiting modesty, inciting us to write on banners: “Down with the privileges of the subject! Down with its exceptional status!” For in doing this

we are jeopardizing—among many other things—precisely that political dimension of ontology which inspires this kind of democratic and egalitarian project.

The stronger thesis that I propose to defend is thus as follows: the subject is not simply an object among many objects; it is also the form of existence of the contradiction, antagonism, at work in the very existence of objects as objects. It refers to the way in which the impasse/contradiction of reality in which different objects appear exists within this same reality. The subject exists among objects, yet it exists there as the point that gives access to a possible objectivation of their inner antagonism, its inscription into their reality. In this precise sense, the fine-sounding thesis about the “democracy of objects” (all objects are ontologically the same, and all are equally worthy of our attention) could be seen as actually (and quite “subjectively”) obfuscating reality “such as it is”: antagonistic. The subject modestly, humbly, retreats to one, not particularly distinguished place in infinite reality, and thus efficiently masks its split, producing reality as neutral and non-problematic in itself (or at least untouchable in its problematic character). Contrary to this, one can conceive of the subject as an existence/form of a certain difficulty (the Real), and as a “response” to it. This response can well be subjective/pathological, but it is never completely reducible to its own pathology; it also carries with it the Real (of a possibly universal bearing) that is not accessible—in itself—in any way but via the very figure of the subject. This is why, by (im)modestly positing the subject as a more or less insignificant point in the universe, one deprives oneself of the possibility to think, radically and seriously, the very “injustice” (asymmetry, contradiction) that made one want to develop an egalitarian ontological project in the first place.

The (Lacanian) subject is not simply the one who thinks, but is also and above all what makes certain contradictions accessible to thought; it is the way in which these contradictions appear as a “matter of thought.” And without this particular “matter of thought” it is difficult to speak of *materialism*. Another way of putting this would be: Lacan’s gesture, which is often misread as his version of “correlationism,” consists in introducing a short-circuit of the epistemological and ontological levels (of knowledge and being) in the form of their joint/common negativity (lack of knowledge falls into a lack of being)—and the concept of the subject (as subject of the unconscious) is situated at this precise juncture.

This is why, for example—and this is crucial—if we cannot think something without a contradiction, we should not take a step back from this impossibility (recognizing and accepting it as impossibility, or inaccessibility to thought); instead, and on the contrary, we have to take this contradiction and impossibility *as the very Real which IS accessible to thought*.



I have elsewhere stressed how logical paradoxes, impasses of formalization, *are* the points where thought thinks the Real; this was one of Lacan's strongest convictions.<sup>36</sup> To think a paradox or contradiction does not mean to stare at it with fascination, as in a kind of mystical revelation of the Absolute; it means precisely what it says—to *think* it.

So perhaps this would be a good formulation of materialism: materialism is thinking which advances as thinking of contradictions.<sup>37</sup> And this is what makes psychoanalysis a materialist theory (and practice): it starts by thinking a problem/difficulty/contradiction, not by trying to think the world such as it is independently of the subject.

After this excursion into the question of the subject, let us return to our prior discussion of what separates Lacan and Deleuze at the very peak of their proximity. In relation to the central question of repetition, they both share a basic conceptual matrix according to which what repeats itself could be formulated by the term "One-plus": something (some discernible entity) plus the surplus that invests and drives it. Deleuze directly identifies the *plus* with the movement of absolute difference, and hence with the real of being. This is the origin of the fundamental Deleuzian duality and its (simple) reversal, accomplished by repetition. In graphic terms: the repetition of the One-plus, driven by the "plus," has to eventually differentiate—with the help of its centrifugal force—precisely between these two terms ("One" and "plus"); it has to break their link and throw out the One of some hypostasized being (or some particular difference, and hence identity) to the benefit of Being (or Difference) as singularity of a pure movement. In this way the repetition, so to speak, "purges *itself*," separates itself from its weighty encumbrance. This, for example, is how Deleuze reads the Nietzschean eternal return: "The wheel in the eternal return is at once both production of repetition on the basis of difference and selection of difference on the basis of repetition."<sup>38</sup> Taking into account the link between repetition and difference, we could say that what is at stake here is the repetition as inner differentiation (or "purge") of the Difference. What does this mean? What is repeated comes from the pure negativity of difference which, in repetition, is always already something (that is to say, some entity which comes under the categories of analogy, similarity, identity); at the same time, this repetition itself is a "centrifugal force" that expels all that which, of the difference, gets "reified" into something in this same repetition.<sup>39</sup> That is to say: it expels all that comes under the categories of analogy, similarity, identity.

The centrifugal force of repetition in its most radical form thus not only introduces the difference at the very core of repetition, but also "realizes" this difference—it realizes it by extracting repetition itself from

repetition, by extracting what is *new* from the mechanism of repetition that produced it. This is what could be described, in Deleuze's terms, as concept-project, the latter being no less than the project of *realized ontology*: "However, the only realized Ontology—in other words, the univocity of being—is repetition."<sup>40</sup> Difference is the only and the original being, yet at the same time it (still) needs to be realized, that is to say, *repeated* and thus separated from all the metaphysical and dialectical encumbrance that constitutes the history of Being and of its thought. This task can be accomplished by the "centrifugal force" of the repetition itself, which will thus bring about the separation between what I referred to above as "good" and "bad" negativity. And the triumph of "good"—that is, of the whole series of the Deleuzian positive predicates (horizontally rhizomatic versus vertically hierarchical, negativity as positive excess versus negativity as lack, multiplicity versus one, nomadic versus static, different versus similar or identical, exceptional versus ordinary . . .)—is, so to speak, inscribed in the force of repetition itself. That is why "realized ontology" looks very much like a *political project* or, more precisely, like something that can do without politics, since it hands its task over to ontology.

Several decades ago, the decline of politics proper (and of conceiving politics as effective thought) was accompanied by the rise of "ethics." The (philosophical and social) success of ethics was linked to its promise to carry out the task of politics better than politics. This is how the rising ethical discourse presented itself: the new ethics to replace the old politics. Concepts like "antagonism," "class struggle," "emancipation," and "politics" itself were generally replaced by notions of "tolerance," "recognition of the Other," and by the self-imposed rules of political correctness.<sup>41</sup> Ever since the beginning of the last economic and political crisis, starting in the early 2000s, the limits of this "ethics as politics" were becoming more salient, and the notion of politics as politics started reentering the stage. At the same time, we were (and still are) witnessing an astounding rise of so-called new ontologies and new materialisms (to a large extent, albeit not exclusively, inspired by Deleuze), which paradoxically advance by making a very similar kind of promise to the one that ethics made a while ago: to be able to carry out the task of politics better than politics. The massive use (and popularity) of the word "ontology" is symptomatic in this respect. And so are many terms that describe these new ontologies; "democracy of objects" is just one of them.

How, then, is Lacan's conceptual (and "practical") maneuver different? Where Deleuze speaks about the *selection* of difference based on repetition, Lacan speaks about the *production* of a new signifier that puts an end to repetition. Although they both emphasize a "selection," that

is, a *separation* concerning something at the very heart of the repetition/difference itself, the crucial divergence lies in the way in which this separation takes place, as well as in the nature of what it produces (as its novelty). What, for Lacan, can bring about the separation within the repeating entity (of One-plus) is not the centrifugal-selective force of the repetition itself; this separation is possible only through a third term, produced in the course of analysis:  $S_1$ , a *new signifier* (situated at the place of “production” in the psychoanalytic discourse). This signifier is a new kind of One—a One that differs from the One which is repeated (in neurosis or in everyday life). The One that is repeated is a One-plus, a compound of a signifier and enjoyment. Here we are at the level of the signifying chain and its inherent peripeteias. The expression “signifying chain” refers to the fact that a signifier is never alone, but is *virtually* connected—via the lack that constitutes it (the One-less)—with all other signifiers, and is *actually* connected to those in which surplus-enjoyment has realized (“glued”) this connection through repetition. For it is precisely this surplus that binds, connects different Ones (signifiers) in concrete circumstances. Analysis, on the other hand, leads to the production of a different, self-standing One: to *One as one alone*.

The One at issue, which the subject produces—an ideal point, let’s say—in analysis, is, contrary to what is at issue in repetition, the One as One by itself. It is the One inasmuch as, whatever difference might exist, all differences are worth as much as another. There is only one of them, and this is *difference per se*.<sup>42</sup>

This also refers to another significant concept elaborated in some detail by Lacan in this same seminar (. . . or Worse), namely, what he writes as *Il y a de l’Un* (which he further abbreviates as *Ya de l’Un*, and even *Yad’lun*): “there’s (some) one,” with the French partitive article *de* paradoxically suggesting an unspecified quantity of One. This term is designed by Lacan to *include* in the notion of the (countable) One what is usually excluded from it, namely, the pure difference out of which and with which it emerges. This pure difference (or “hole,” *trou*) is, he suggests, the “grounding” of the One: “On the basis of what is involved in the place where a hole is made, in this something that, if you want a figuration, I would represent as being the foundation of *Yad’lun*, there can only be Oneness in the figure of a bag, which is a bag with a hole in it. Nothing is One that doesn’t come out of this bag, or which does not go back into the bag. This is the original grounding, to take it intuitively, of the One.”<sup>43</sup>

And the new kind of One ( $S_1$ ), in its singularity, is very closely related to this foundational “hole.” Its function is to give a signifying sup-

port to the rift, the crack, that is implied by yet invisible in the deployment of differences (symptoms), and is repeated with them. This is also the way in which the seemingly abstract notion of *Y a de l'Un* (abbreviated into *Yad'lun*) is related to psychoanalytic practice. Lacan indicates this relation (or perhaps we should say this coincidence) with the homonymy “*y'a d'l'inconscient*” (“there is the unconscious”).<sup>44</sup> The Freudian/Lacanian concept of the unconscious is thus directly related to the notion of *Yad'lun* (and to the Real implied by it). The unconscious is not a *realm* of being; the unconscious “exists” because there is a crack in being out of which comes whatever discursive (ontological) consistency there is. And the production of a new signifier puts us at the point of this “beginning”—which is not a beginning in time, but a beginning as a point in the structure where things are being generated. The new signifier is supposed to name the difference that makes all the difference(s).

It is crucial to note that in the quote from Lacan above, the emphasis is on production: what is at stake is not that in the course of psychoanalysis one *finds* the missing signifier—the latter is precisely not something that could be found, dug up from the unconscious. For it is most literally not there (and this is *why* there is the unconscious—the unconscious is the crack implied by the one-less). This is not a repressed signifier, but a signifier whose non-being is the only thing that makes repression possible, and structurally precedes it. (This is where Freud introduced the hypothesis of “primal repression.”) The new signifier,  $S_p$ , does not replace this “hole” with which the signifying order appears, does not close or do away with it; rather, it produces it (by producing its letter) as something that can work as an emancipatory weapon. In what sense?

All in all, the operation of the analytic discourse is to fashion a model of the neurosis. Why? Well, to the extent that it takes out the rib of *jouissance*. Indeed, *jouissance* demands this special privilege. There are not two ways of doing this for each subject. Every reduplication kills *jouissance*. *Jouissance* only survives in that its repetition is of no avail, that is to say, it is always the same. It is the introduction of the model that completes it—this repetition of no avail. A completed repetition dissolves it, in that it is a simplified repetition.<sup>45</sup>

The model of neurosis succeeds in repeating its enjoyment, hence killing it off. However, if this is the ideal end of analysis, its beginning very much relies on enjoyment, and on putting it to work—it is only and precisely its work that eventually produces the “new signifier.” For we must ask: what is it that makes possible the construction of the “model” of neurosis to begin with, and ends in the production of a new signifier? This is certainly

not the analyst's knowledge, her expertise, but has to come from the subject herself. And, as a matter of fact, Lacan is most explicit on this point: the new signifier "is produced when the subject is placed at the level of the *jouissance* of speaking."<sup>46</sup> This, of course, is another way of saying that it is produced starting from the "initial flowering" of the signifier, its polysemic babble, its equivocalities.<sup>47</sup>

Enjoyment is thus the very means of production of the signifier that eventually kills it off; this signifier interposes itself between the (signifying) enjoyment and the hole/gap at the place of which the latter appears, "takes place."

This, then, is an important conceptual feature that separates Lacan from Deleuze: the surplus ("the erratic/unbound excess," enjoyment) is not in itself the real scene of emancipation, but the means of production of that which eventually realizes this "emancipation"; the eventual tectonic shift does not take place at the level of this surplus, but thanks to the newly produced *signifier*. It is the signifier of the "hole" at the place of which enjoyment appears that repeats this "hole" in different disguises or signifying formations. This new signifier depends on the subject's individual and contingent history, yet it is not simply part of this history. It is what reiteration, repetition of this history in analysis, produces as a word that works. Works at what? At shifting something in our relation to the signifying order that (in)forms our being. As early as 1957, in his essay "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious"—and this title chimes strongly with what we are developing here—Lacan writes:

It is by touching, however lightly, on man's relation to the signifier—in this case, by changing the procedures of exegesis—that one changes the course of his history by modifying the moorings of his being.<sup>48</sup>

This, then, would be the more complex schema: the placing of the subject at the level of enjoyment in talking enables the production of a new signifier from the perspective of which it is now possible to effect a separation at the heart of the One-plus involved in repetition. This new signifier is the event proper, and it triggers a new subjectivization.

The new signifier is the algorithm that disorients the drive by cutting off the well-established routes of its satisfaction. It is what inserts itself at the very core of the double face of the drive and of its "satisfaction." In itself, the drive is quite indiscriminate, indifferent toward what it satisfies along the path of pursuing its one and only goal, which is simply to "return into circuit,"<sup>49</sup> that is, to repeat itself, as Deleuze reads this. This is the "affirmative" force of repetition (repetition for the sake of repetition) related to the drive: not something that failed, but repetition itself as the sole "drive" of the drive. The drive is always satisfied.

However, in its very indifference it is also always supportive of whatever complicated paths and extraordinary objects our enjoyment may choose *under the sign of repression*. It doesn't care one way or the other. By itself, the drive does not work against repression (which retroactively works on repetition). In this precise sense the death drive is as much an accomplice of repression as it is utterly indifferent to it. This also means that one cannot simply count on it to make the "right" selection (which is what is implied in the Nietzschean/Deleuzean perspective). There is absolutely no guarantee that, left to itself, the drive will expel the right (that is, the wrong) things, as Deleuze seems to maintain. One needs something else, or more: only a new signifier (and the new *subjectivation* triggered by it) can effect and sustain the separation at the very heart of the drive. Not a *force* (be it centrifugal or other), only a *letter* can disentangle what exists only in entangled form, and hence eventually change this form itself.

This is precisely the point where what we can call a "Lacanian politics" comes in. Or, perhaps more precisely, this is where the space of politics opens up. This space is essentially connected to the gap/crack of the unconscious—not a specific unconscious, but the unconscious as the concept of the gap with which discursive reality appears, and struggles. Politics, in the strong sense of the term, always involves a reactivation of this gap.

## Notes

Much of this chapter appeared in slightly different form in Alenka Zupančič, *What IS Sex?* 106–28, copyright © 2017 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; reprinted by permission of the MIT Press.

1. In the context of the Freudian theory of the sexual seduction of children (and the possible "trauma" related to it), Jean Laplanche has convincingly argued that this kind of alternative is wrong, or too simple. Freud first posited the sexual seduction of children by adults as real, that is to say, as a factual/empirical event in the child's history, which is then repressed and can become the ground or *cause* of different symptoms and neurotic disturbances. Later, he abandoned this theory in favor of the theory of the fantasy of seduction: generally speaking, seduction is not an event that takes place in empirical reality, but a fantasy constructed later, in the period of our sexual awareness, and it exists only in the psychic reality of the subject. Approached with the tool of the distinction between material reality and psychic reality (fantasy), the question of sexual seduction leads either to the claim that everything is material seduction (for how exactly are we to isolate and define the latter: does touching a baby's lips, for example, or its bottom, qualify as seduction?) or to the conclusion that seduction is entirely fantasmatic, mediated by the psychic reality of the one who "feels seduced." Laplanche's answer to this conflict between raw materialism and psychological idealism is profoundly materialistic in the sense that he recognizes

a properly *material* cause, yet a cause that cannot be reduced to (or deduced from) what has empirically happened in the interaction between the child and the adult. In other words, according to Laplanche, the true trigger of the subsequent constitution of the unconscious lies neither in raw material reality nor in the ideal reality of fantasy, but is the very materiality of a third reality, which is transverse to the other two and which Laplanche calls the material reality of the enigmatic message. For more on this, see Laplanche's "Psychoanalysis as Anti-Hermeneutics," *Radical Philosophy* 79 (1996): 7–12.

2. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 236.

3. Again, we find a similar move in Laplanche's theory, according to which "psychic reality" is not created by us but is essentially *invasive*; it comes, it invades us from the outside, where it is already constituted (as the unconscious of others). See Laplanche, "Psychoanalysis as Anti-Hermeneutics."

4. See Catherine Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

5. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 237–38.

6. *Ibid.*, 234.

7. Also, it is not quite clear in this account how the aboriginal trauma becomes, appears as, the "unbound excess" (of excitation), which then needs to be bound by anxiety summoned by the repetition of an unpleasant experience.

8. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 16. Deleuze uses the term "death instinct," following the then current French translation of the Freudian *Todestrieb*.

9. *Ibid.*, 18.

10. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 719.

11. Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990), 19.

12. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 16.

13. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1963–1964*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 198.

14. Hence Deleuze writes, for example, that even when we are dealing with something that appears to be repetition of the same (such as, for instance, the rituals in obsessional neurosis), we have to recognize in the element that is being repeated—that is, in the repetition of the same—the mask of a deeper repetition. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 17.

15. *Ibid.*, 17.

16. *Ibid.*, 105. And Deleuze actually attributes this reversal to Freud, and to his hypothesis of "primal repression."

17. *Ibid.*, 105.

18. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 198.

19. For a more detailed elaboration of this point, see my essay "Sexuality within the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Sex and Nothing: Bridges from Psychoanalysis to Philosophy*, ed. Alejandro Cerda-Rueda (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3–17.

20. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 38.

21. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIX: . . . or Worse, 1971–1972*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A. R. Price (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2018), 120.

22. *Ibid.*, 125.

23. Quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 331.

24. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 321; emphasis added.

25. *Ibid.*, 322.

26. *Ibid.*, 325.

27. Lacan, . . . or Worse, 126, 138, 137, 127.

28. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 326.

29. Discussing his “myth” of the lamella (related to the death drive), Lacan writes: “It is the libido, *qua* pure life instinct, that is to say immortal life, or irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life. It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction. And it is of this that all the forms of the *objet a* that can be enumerated are the representatives, the equivalents. The *objets a* are merely its representatives, its figures. The breast—as equivocal, as an element characteristic of the mammiferous organization, the placenta for example—certainly represents that part of himself that the individual loses at birth, and which may serve to symbolize the most profound lost object. I could make the same kind of reference for all the other objects.” Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 198.

30. Normativity—culturally prescribed normative sexuality—intervenes at the point of this crack; its primary aim is not to unify and “tame” the original heterogeneity of partial drives, but rather to *obfuscate* and at the same time *exploit* this founding crack and its “productivity.” In this sense, what Foucault says about the “repressive hypothesis” is quite correct (and he is actually repeating Lacan’s point here): in modern societies, sexuality has been *anything but* repressed; we have been witnessing—with respect to sexuality—a gigantic “incitement to discourse,” an “implantation of perversity,” a gesture of bringing sexuality into focus and under the spotlight, seeing it everywhere, making, even forcing it, to speak all the time. What is lacking from Foucault’s account is, quite simply, the notion of the unconscious and of “repression” in the Freudian sense (*Verdrängung*), which is not mentioned one single time in the entire first volume of the *History of Sexuality*. From a Lacanian point of view, the discursive proliferation of sexuality (and its exploitation) is made possible only by its structural relation to the unconscious as the “founding negativity” of sexuality itself. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see my essay “Biopolitics, Sexuality and the Unconscious,” *Paragraph* 39, no. 1 (2016): 49–64.

31. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 113.

32. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 322.



33. Although one should stress that very often they do not come even close to the complexity of Deleuzian philosophy.

34. Quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 32. I will not repeat Žižek's argument, which I cannot but agree with, but will use this quote for my own purposes.

35. This, for example, is the basic move we find in Levi Bryant's otherwise very complex work, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities, 2011).

36. See chapter three of my *What IS Sex?* esp. 62–72.

37. In this sense, Hegel may well be the philosophical materialist par excellence. As Mladen Dolar has pointed out, in direct opposition to a long (Aristotelian) tradition aligning truth with the principle of noncontradiction, Hegel took a very different step with the first of his “habilitation theses” (which served as the basis of his Ph.D. defense in August 1801) when he said: “Contradictio est regula veri, non contradiction falsi”—Contradiction is the rule of truth, noncontradiction of the false. See Dolar, *Fenomenologija duha I* (Ljubljana: Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, 1990), 20.

38. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 42.

39. Ibid., 297.

40. Ibid., 303.

41. Žižek has developed this point on several occasions.

42. Lacan, . . . or Worse, 145.

43. Ibid., 127.

44. As Lacan puts it in a lecture from the yet to be published Seminar XXI, *Les non-dupes errent* (May 21, 1974).

45. Lacan, . . . or Worse, 130–31.

46. Ibid., 145.

47. Ibid., 130.

48. Lacan, *Écrits*, 438.

49. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 179.

# Why Sex Is Special: Psychoanalysis against New Materialism

Nathan Gorelick

Who Cares?

Why should psychoanalysis be concerned with new materialism? This philosophical complex—in which I include speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, posthumanism, and other intellectual trends in the lineage of Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy—is founded upon a shared resistance to the metaphysical supposition, active since Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, that reality has no meaningful existence beyond that with which it is imbued by human consciousness.<sup>1</sup> According to this critique of “correlationism,” the Kantian paradigm enables a pervasive anthropocentrism which holds the human in an exceptional position with respect to all other forms of being. Such exceptionalism, moreover, is not neutral, but rather authorizes and motivates the reduction of the nonhuman to an instrument in service to rational consciousness. In this way, reality independent of our experience of it, what Kant called the “thing-in-itself” and Quentin Meillassoux evocatively terms “the *great outdoors*,” is excluded from true ethical concern.<sup>2</sup> The moral basis of new materialism, then, is an opposition to the philosophical conditions for the possibility of anthropocentrism, a protest against the metaphysical violence at the core of the cascade of ecological catastrophes we now recognize as the Anthropocene. Such a protest aims to deprive the human of its apparent exceptionalism by either elevating other forms of being to the level of the human or bringing the human down to its proper relative proportions. What does any of this have to do with that most human of the human sciences, psychoanalysis? And why should we position psychoanalysis *against* these efforts to foster a moral or ethical regard for the universe of nonhuman entities?

This chapter wagers that psychoanalysis should be concerned with

new materialism because new materialism needs psychoanalysis. It needs it, as my title is intended to suggest, in much the same way that Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* famously revealed how Foucaultians need a Lacanian conception of the Real, without which they cannot recognize that any discursive field which organizes a given system of social relations inevitably stumbles against a limit internal to language itself. The historicists are not wrong, Copjec insists, to emphasize that nothing transcends language; this is true, and yet it is this very "nothing," the constitutive negation of any transcendental beyond of discourse, which discourse cannot count among its constituent elements and which therefore sustains the possibility of resistance to the ossification of historically determined power relations.<sup>3</sup> In short, there can be no Foucaultian conception of freedom, of the potential for resistance, without the Real, because the Real is what incompletes language by rendering it interminably different from itself.

New materialism positions itself at a far remove from historicism, wishing as it does to consider reality independent of the filters through which it passes on its way to consciousness—including especially language. Even so, in its effort to think beyond anthropocentrism, it performs the same sort of flattening of being that dooms historicism to the reification of that which it most wants to subvert. Where the historicists immanentize power, the new materialists immanentize human being as such—thus, for example, Whitehead's characterization of the cosmos as a "democracy of fellow creatures," or Levi Bryant's more emphatic "democracy of objects."<sup>4</sup> As with the historicists, this rejection of the transcendental subject, at least as far as concerns its Kantian iteration, is entirely warranted. Yet by denying the ontological specificity of the human in favor of an emphasis on the inherent "solidarity" of all things, new materialists also deny the specifically human capacity ethically to regard the nonhuman other as, precisely, other, instead absorbing the human and nonhuman alike into an affective, undifferentiated sameness.<sup>5</sup>

Through a mistaken interpretive twist, moreover, new materialists accuse psychoanalysis of just this move against difference. Steven Shaviro, for instance, defines the Lacanian concept of the Real (tellingly, not by way of Lacan, but only through scant reference to Slavoj Žižek's reading of Hegel) as the "radically undifferentiated" remainder of what cannot be integrated into the Symbolic and thus as another version of the Kantian thing-in-itself that "is still not posited outside of the correlationist horizon."<sup>6</sup> This precipitate accusation evinces a fundamental misunderstanding of both the Real and the Symbolic—and of the Lacanian subject, which is decidedly not a transcendental-metaphysical hypothesis. For while the Real is the effect of the negation which constitutes the posi-

tion of the subject with respect to the Symbolic, it is for just this reason that it does not exist prior to this constitutive negation. The Real is not the thing-in-itself which precedes and persists beyond consciousness, but the consequence of the specifically human experience of *castration*, that is, the experience of the imposition of the signifier that compels the living being's entrance into the Symbolic, which is the condition of belonging to the social link. For psychoanalysis, this is not a chronological but a logical fact; it is an account of the origin of the logic of unconscious fantasy that urges the subject toward an undifferentiated sameness, a state of primordial plenitude, which in fact never existed to begin with and never can exist—whence Lacan's frequent insistence that the Real is synonymous with the impossible. In short, fantasy is the domain of the Real, and not the other way around. There is therefore no undifferentiated sameness in psychoanalysis; in fact, the latter situates the urge toward metaphysical totality, the very problem new materialism wishes to address, as a symptom of the *lack in being* that specifies the human experience and urges the human toward an always impossible fulfillment. New materialism's refusal to think this specificity therefore amounts to a refusal to avow the particularly human phenomenon of castration, a fetishistic disavowal that, as such, cannot but remain attached to and reproduce the very symptom it means to undermine.

With psychoanalysis, on the other hand, it is possible to accept new materialism's critique of anthropocentrism and to entertain the various debates it generates without abandoning the conviction that there is something special about human being, as indeed there must be if the new materialists' ethical appeal is to have an addressee. This "something special," the lack in being which is the mark of the impossible and the site of unconscious fantasy, is what Freud called sex—more precisely, sexuality. Sex is radically peculiar in that it is neither transcendental nor reducible to the materiality it animates. It is rather what Alenka Zupančič calls an "ontological lapse," a hole in being, the specifically human encounter with which is called the unconscious.<sup>7</sup> The stakes of the Freudian and Lacanian formulation of sexuality, then, are nothing short of ontological. To hold to the specificity of the human on these terms does not imply some hierarchy of valuation which positions human being above or beyond other modes of being; on the contrary, positing sexual difference as ontological difference forces us to consider, with new materialism, how the metaphysics of the subject is insufficient grounds for any ethical relation, including not only human relations but also the possibility of a relation between the human and its nonhuman others.

Against new materialism, though, psychoanalysis can push such considerations beyond the framework of the symptom and thus beyond

the fantasy that new materialism inadvertently reifies. In situating psychoanalysis “against” new materialism, we therefore are not promoting an objection or a simple opposition in the spirit of intellectual dogmatism, nor are we stubbornly defending the Kantian tradition and its anthropocentric implications. We are rather marking the difference between psychoanalysis and new materialism, emphasizing that this difference is the space of an antagonism without which there could be no meaningful relation, and striking a defiant pose against the new materialist tendency to dismiss psychoanalysis as merely one more iteration of the metaphysics of human exceptionalism. The horizon of this antagonism, finally, is a properly psychoanalytic materialism that can address the trouble with correlationism without, however, abnegating the ontological peculiarity of the human. This would be a materialism of the ontological negativity, the peculiar lapse, which the human lives in its own special way: an account of the strange materiality of sex.

### The Human Object

To understand how psychoanalysis not only avoids entrapment within correlationist thinking but profoundly disturbs it, we first need a more extensive account of the new materialist critique, beginning with the supposed origins of correlationism in Kant’s critical philosophy. Kant’s “Copernican revolution” in metaphysics, so the argument goes, banished the thing-in-itself to an inaccessible beyond of consciousness. While Kant concedes that the thing certainly exists, he insists that it can concern us only as an object of thought, and is thus a correlate of the categories of the understanding. Reality is therefore bifurcated along the fault line between the physical and the metaphysical: on the one hand, with metaphysics, there are subjects of knowledge and objects of thought; on the other, there is the world as it is, beyond all comprehension. We are inherently confined by the limits of cognition; one cannot think beyond thought, since to do so, of course, is still thinking.<sup>8</sup> With this, Kant interrupted a number of metaphysical conversations that for new materialists were far from exhausted, so that while they acknowledge the Kantian turn, they also insist we should not simply give up on the original Enlightenment materialists’ efforts to think objects in themselves. The core of this objection, then, is that the Kantian system poses an absolute division between immanence and transcendence. Paraphrasing Whitehead, Shavero articulates the anti-correlationist position most clearly: “the question of *how we know* cannot come first, for our way of knowing is itself a conse-

quence, or a product, of how things actually are and what they do.”<sup>9</sup> The new materialist question, therefore, is: how are things, actually?

In order to initiate a response to this question, and again rejecting the absolute division between immanence and transcendence, new materialism dethrones cognition from its place at the pinnacle of metaphysics and situates it alongside all other modes of being, what Whitehead calls “actual entities” and “eternal objects, *or* Pure Potentials.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, philosophy rebukes its anthropocentric roots. For Whitehead, this was both a moral imperative and a strategy by which he hoped to establish a grand unifying theory of metaphysics, a *speculative philosophy* that could fuse empiricism *qua* Locke with rationalism *qua* Kant. To this end, his magnum opus, *Process and Reality*, begins with the thesis that “the process, or concrescence, of any one actual entity involves the other actual entities among its components. In this way the obvious solidarity of the world receives its explanation.”<sup>11</sup> Differently put, everything is both singular unto itself and connected to every other thing, however subtle these connections may be, because everything participates in being and, more emphatically, *is* being, which is not a static state but a dynamic process of becoming. Everything becomes. In this view, thought is no more or less relevant to being than any other thing.

The new materialist position thus can be summarized as follows: first, there is no transcendence, only immanence; second, this implies that Kantian metaphysics be rejected, or at least tabled, such that almost every instance of new materialism endeavors, with great diversity, to establish a non-correlationist paradigm of thought; third, conceding the truism that thinking cannot think outside of thought, this new paradigm would have to be both realist and *speculative*; fourth, this speculation must demote the human to the level of all other actual existing entities or promote all entities to the level of the human; fifth, and finally, all of this is built upon an ontological principle of relationality, a process philosophy according to which being is becoming.

To situate psychoanalysis here, we first need to note the insufficiency of new materialist strategies of escape from the correlationist vortex. Shaviri offers a helpful summation of these strategies by dividing them into two alternatives: with Graham Harman, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Shaviri himself, a vitalism or “panpsychism” which holds that “all entities are in their own right at least to some degree sentient (active, intentional, vital, and possessed of powers)”; or, with Meillassoux and Ray Brassier, an “eliminativism” which posits that thought itself is utterly contingent, accidental, in no way essential to being.<sup>12</sup> Either the human is generalized through an anthropomorphism that stretches the definition of thought toward semantic vacuity, or thought is reduced to an

at best trivial aftereffect of being. The real problem with either alternative, though, is that despite their anti-Kantian ambitions, both assume a definition of thought that is entirely consistent with Kant's and merely append a "what if" to the limit of the transcendental subject. The pan-psychist position emphasizes what thought *does*, according to Kant, and asserts that insofar as nonhuman entities do the same they, too, deserve to be considered thoughtful, at least sentient, if not actually conscious. The eliminativist position concedes the Kantian model of consciousness but complains that it too severely limits our considerations of the nonconscious universe of things. In either case, it is as though new materialists have accepted the rules of the game, so to speak, but have taken the ball out to the stadium parking lot.

Psychoanalysis, meanwhile, stays in the game but changes the rules. Consider the a priori condition of the possibility for consciousness, the subjective frame in which the categories of the understanding operate, which Kant in the first *Critique* calls the unity of transcendental apperception.<sup>13</sup> Lacan's response is that the unity of apperception is not transcendental but imaginary, oriented as it is by the mirror stage, and that the consciousness which results from this imaginary unity names only the "function of misrecognition that characterizes the ego."<sup>14</sup> Against but not beyond the Kantian paradigm, psychoanalysis therefore insists that the essence of the human is not consciousness—however defined—but the unconscious, which emphatically is not the unconscious of the subject. Rather, the subject is the subject of the unconscious.

Furthermore, we know not from philosophical abstraction but from concrete psychoanalytic experience that there is indeed a beyond of thought which cognition cannot digest and which for this reason is the inexhaustible wellspring of its desire to know, and is thus also the cause of the proliferation of discourses of knowledge and truth which, no matter how precise, seem always to fall short of their mark. This beyond, however, is not an object in any materialist sense of the word, nor will we find it by exploring Meillassoux's "great outdoors," because it is rather a great *indoors*, an excess which haunts consciousness from within its own limits, which *is* its own internal limit. This is what Freud calls sexuality. It is not beyond consciousness; it is the beyond of consciousness. Following from this, psychoanalysis does indeed operate within the Kantian framework, but by way of a radical subversion: it admits that thought cannot think outside of itself, yet it insists that *what* thought thinks and, more importantly, *how* it thinks are determined by what it *cannot* think, at least not according to any principle of correlation.

This is why Lacan characterizes the subject through an inversion of the Cartesian maxim *cogito ergo sum*: "I am thinking where I am not,

therefore I am where I am not thinking.”<sup>15</sup> More simply: I am there where I do not think. The subject thus names not a plenitude of thinking over and against other forms of being, but an epistemological impasse resulting from the encounter with the ontological negativity of sex. Human exceptionalism does not follow from this but is in fact animated by its disavowal. Exceptionalism, in other words, is a symptom. This recalls our first reason why new materialism needs psychoanalysis, which is less a fixed theoretical apparatus than it is a practice and an experience motivated by an ethical fidelity to what the human dis-owns in its quest for mastery, totality, or the absolute coincidence of consciousness and truth.

But this rebuke, even if it knocks thought off its high horse by situating the human otherwise than in terms of rational consciousness, does not mean that we can simply “sidestep the correlationist circle,” as Shavero puts it.<sup>16</sup> Rather, Lacan throws us right into the middle of it, attuning us to what, in constituting his metaphysical system, Kant has *repressed*—particularly in the movement from the first to the second *Critique*, which is to say, in the movement from the metaphysical conditions of experience as such to those conditions’ implications for ethics and the moral law. The first *Critique* installs an absolute division between the noumenal (the domain of pure mentality) and the phenomenal (the realm of appearances), hence new materialism’s complaint. The second *Critique* extends this absolutizing move by situating the moral law on the side of pure (practical) reason, of unfettered rationality, and desire in the field of empirical experience and natural determination. Lacan rather surprisingly locates the Kantian symptom—the return of the repressed, thus the truth of the subject of the moral law—in the Marquis de Sade, who “completes” the second *Critique* by exposing the logic of fantasy which drives it and the resulting *jouissance* which sticks to the margins of the Kantian moral framework. Briefly stated and brutally summarized, Sade’s commitment to desire is as unwavering and uncompromising as Kant’s commitment to rational morality, and for Lacan this unravels the absolute distinction between morality and desire, and thus between transcendence and immanence.<sup>17</sup> This unraveling is also at the center of the new materialist critique but, unlike the latter, psychoanalysis does not give in to Whitehead’s or Meillassoux’s temptation toward some speculative beyond.

We need not rehearse the whole of Lacan’s “Kant *avec* Sade” to extract its consequences for our present concern. The first such consequence is that desire is not simply the spontaneous reaction of a living being to the sensation of some organic need. Desire, oriented as it is by unconscious fantasy, drives the subject beyond organic determination—beyond the pleasure principle and what is useful for the organism or for the social link—in its quest for an impossible satisfaction. Second, the



*jouissance* at stake in this quest is no less painful than the enjoyment one suffers (Kant's term is "moral feeling") in performing one's duty to the moral law.<sup>18</sup> More than this, the moral law is not a fact of pure reason but is itself a function—that is, a symptom—of this *jouissance*. It is at work in its idealized Kantian form only if it is experienced by the subject as un-pleasurable. Furthermore, this means that reason is a symptomatic defense against desire, the result of a desire to escape desire itself, the inevitable frustration of which is thereby inscribed in the moral law at its very foundations. Desire, meanwhile, is not the subject's desire but the desire of the Other—the lack in the Other to which corresponds the lack in being that is the cause of the subject's quest for the impossible. In other words, it is not only the subject which is lacking; the Other in relation to which the subject's desire is articulated is also riven by a lack, namely, the lack to which corresponds the subject of the unconscious.

All this means that rationality and desire are not mutually exclusive, and the effort to make them so is also a symptom of their uncomfortable relation. Rationality and desire, in the last analysis, are co-constitutive. Lacan expresses this co-constitutivity through the formula for the logic of fantasy:  $\$ \diamond a$ . On the one hand, this formula is a universal attribute of the human and indicates, *contra* Kant, that human desire is not natural. The human is precisely *unnatural*, not because rational free will (here, morality) places us over and above nature, but because rationality itself is directed by its own obscene underside, because fantasy orients and organizes reality, which wants to know nothing about it. The logical formula also insists that while the unconscious may not be rational it nevertheless has its reasons, strange though they are when compared to the Kantian rational schema. On the other hand, every instance of unconscious fantasy is singular, so that no human being is exactly alike and all of us are recalcitrant to the homogenizing discourses of anthropocentrism or biological determinism—a recalcitrance we can realize by following the trail of desire the fantasy leaves in its wake. Thus, desire is a more definite basis of freedom than the law—whether conceived rationally or situated on the side of natural determination—can ever hope to be. This is the core of the Freudian discovery and the hinge upon which Lacan's articulation of the ethics, and therefore the practice, of psychoanalysis turns.

To further grasp the insufficiency of new materialism with respect to the humanity it purports to address, it bears repeating that the third variable in the logic of fantasy, the *objet petit a*, strictly speaking does not exist, which means that it cannot be counted among Whitehead's "actual entities."<sup>19</sup> It is rather what guarantees the specifically human mode of being-as-becoming: the human being as a being of desire. And the subject of desire, the subject of the unconscious, the barred S in the for-

mula (\$), is not the subject of consciousness or cognition. Insofar as it is this subject rather than the Cartesian or Lockean or Kantian subject that addresses the analyst, psychoanalysis is built upon a concern for a facet of the human that correlates to no existing object and that cannot be called “thought” at all, at least not according to the concepts of thought that belong to this philosophical tradition. We therefore can concede to Whitehead and his philosophical progeny that other modes of being—animal, vegetable, or mineral—have experience, or are sentient, or even that such beings think, while still maintaining that what demarcates the human is that it lives the traumatic encounter with the signifier that splits the subject and lodges the impossible object that would complete it at the vanishing point of unconscious fantasy. In other words, the specifically human experience is castration.

To say that rocks or birds or distant stars are not castrated does not bar them from the “obvious solidarity” at the basis of Whitehead’s process philosophy, but it does invite us to consider how the anthropocentric refusal to recognize this solidarity is a symptom of the ontological negativity at the core of the human, to which both fantasy and the signifier, and the Kantian conception of pure reason, are a response. Nor does the fact of castration index merely a degree of difference between the human and the rest of being; it is a qualitative, ontological difference for which new materialism refuses to account. Such a refusal elevates all of nonhuman being only by nullifying the peculiarity of the human object. For if the human is oriented by an object which does not exist, if the site of the human is a subject which itself does not exist, then it can gain no admittance into the “obvious solidarity” of Whitehead’s actual entities. In venturing toward the great outdoors, new materialism leaves the human out in the cold.

That new materialism mitigates the ethical basis of its own critique follows from this nullification of the human. The configuration of desire through the logic of fantasy and the ethical injunction to follow the trail of one’s own desire is the beginning of human freedom, such as it is. And freedom, we must admit, is a necessary presumption of any project that wishes to see or relate to the world in terms other than those already established, including those of anthropocentrism and metaphysics. Freedom, then, is not the freedom to obey, as with Kant’s moral law, nor is it synonymous with emancipation from natural determination. It is rather the freedom to become. It is not a freedom of intentionality, but a freedom of desire; it is not imbued with vitality, but haunted by the death drive. It is the freedom of the Act, the potential to rupture the prescribed parameters of the social order, which is why for Lacan such acts are exemplified by Sade’s outrageous graphomania, or by Antigone’s defiance

of the sovereign will which causes the whole edifice of the state to come crashing down around her.<sup>20</sup>

Through these literary references, Lacan suggests that to take responsibility for one's desire entails a creative energy that breaks with the established limits of the possible or the good, always to incalculable effect. This responsibility, and the desire proper to it, are not beyond or immune to ideology, yet they refuse ideological circumscription, especially where ideology operates under the banner of the transcendental subject to presume a notion of the human as a sovereign individual, which presumption forms the core of instrumental rationality and the basis of its violent excesses against the human and nonhuman world. Because the ethics of psychoanalysis activates the subject's fundamental disquietude with regard to its position within any ideological context, it invites, or demands, new and ever-renewing modes of relating to, caring for, and encountering difference. The new materialist enthusiasm for the leveling of being, meanwhile, either through a total anthropomorphism or a complete elimination of the uniqueness of the human from any consideration of being, would deprive the human of its self-difference and annihilate this basis for ethical creativity.

It is not that new materialism has no regard for difference, only that such regard only occurs against the backdrop of a radical sameness, a "flat ontology." The stakes of this flattening reach beyond the problem of new materialism's tendency toward ethical incoherence, troubling to the core its apparent egalitarianism. Here we should recall Alain Badiou's indictment of the "passion for the real" characteristic of the twentieth century's ambition to eliminate all antagonisms in the name of a unified One; or Copjec's similar description of modernism's impulse toward erasure: "to wipe the slate clean, all the way down to the material support itself, pure, pristine, and generalizable: . . . Being as such; . . . the white walls of modern museums on which paintings of all historical periods could be equally well displayed."<sup>21</sup> The representational violence implicit in such a move, and the physical and psychological violence with which the historical deployment of this ambition for undifferentiated totality has been populated, are terrifyingly patent. Psychoanalysis protests, on the contrary, that such a leveling inevitably falters when it runs up against the hard kernel of desire that insists upon the ontological peculiarity of the human, despite our best intentions or most elaborate speculations. The unconscious is a fatal rebuke against any ethics of the lowest common denominator.

This is not correlationism. We have known since Freud that there is an outside of thought, an object which is irreducible to its materiality yet which cognition cannot digest, and it is called sex. To follow the trail

of desire into the uncertain terrain of fantasy, to break with the norms of cognition and the anthropocentric morality they puppet by confronting rationality with its own obscene underside, to take responsibility for the terrible enjoyment we extract not only from the assumption of human exceptionalism but also from the critique of that same exceptionalism, to ground this ethics not in what exists but in what does not exist—might this be a more radical challenge to thought than any exercise of speculation?

### The Body Eclectic: On the Strange Materiality of the Drive

This last hypothesis concerning the ethics of psychoanalysis as a viable basis for a critical response to the Anthropocene is at the center of Alenka Zupančič's "object-disoriented ontology," a Lacanian ontology (un)grounded upon the specifically human problem of sexuality. Zupančič argues that if sexuality is an ontological lapse or negativity, it therefore short-circuits both epistemology and ontology by indexing a gap in being, the knowledge of which no materialism, however speculative, can provide.<sup>22</sup> Sex dis-orient the human by dis-locating the relation of the subject to the object in the domain of unconscious fantasy, such that human being is always out of joint not only with respect to the rest of being but also, and primarily, with respect to itself. To account for this dis-orientation requires a conception of the subject that, like the unconscious itself, operates within but also against the parameters of intelligibility within which the history of subjectivity has been inscribed. Thus, apropos of Meillassoux's eliminativism but equally applicable to the panpsychist position, Zupančič argues that "by (im)modestly positing the subject as a more or less insignificant point in the universe, one deprives oneself of the possibility to think, radically and seriously, the very 'injustice' (asymmetry, contradiction) that made one want to develop an egalitarian ontological project in the first place."<sup>23</sup> Without some conception of the subject, in other words, there can be no foundation for even an anti-subjective ethics. The ontological lapse, marked by Lacan under the heading of the Real, "is not accessible—in itself—in any way but via the very figure of the subject."<sup>24</sup>

This comports with the position we have been pursuing thus far, but it raises a dangerous question: does sexuality conceived as the negativity at the core of being not retain the subject, in however complicated a manner, precisely in the form of an abstraction, a necessary postu-

late of psychoanalysis, as “real” as Kant’s necessary postulates of God or the immortality of the soul, and thus as an effect of thought with no reality beyond its postulation? Or, even if psychoanalysis dethrones the transcendental subject, does it not simply put sexuality in the subject’s place? Is the ontological priority of sexuality thus not the correlationist move par excellence? Even if not, does this rather cede the very cause of psychoanalysis—the desire to know the truth of the subject of the unconscious—to the realm of speculation, and thus to the philosophical solipsism of which we have been accusing new materialists’ speculations on the great outdoors?

To move beyond this suspicion—which is to say, to retain the conviction that sex names a gap in being, a constitutive negativity of being, and that unconscious fantasy is the specifically human response to this gap, without in so doing inviting the objection that this is just another version of transcendental metaphysics—and to do so in a way that can provide new materialism with an account of the human that supplies an ethical basis for its critique, we need to work out a properly psychoanalytic materialism. We need an account of the materiality of sex.

Such an account, however, was already present at the beginning—even before the beginning—of the Freudian discovery. This is not a matter of theoretical abstraction but of psychoanalytic experience and its irreducibility to any abstract schema, including first and foremost the emperor of abstraction, language itself. Consider the *Studies on Hysteria*. Against the grain of the whole medical establishment of the time, which insisted that any physical ailment must be traceable to a physiological origin, Freud intuited that the bodily symptom for which no such origin could be found must be the effect of *pathogenic ideas*, thus from an impasse at the level of the signifier, a resistance to articulation of some traumatic experience that, failing to find its place along a signifying chain, expresses its significance in a displaced form by interrupting the normal physiological operations of the organism.<sup>25</sup> In his first major case history after the discovery of the unconscious, Freud modulates this notion by introducing a new term, “somatic compliance,” which briefly can be defined as the embodied expression of an unconscious desire.<sup>26</sup> Later, within the development of the theory of infantile sexuality, Freud generalized this interruption of the organic through his encounter with *the drive*. From the first pages of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, it is clear that the energy of the drive—libido—is not the energy the living organism expends in its quest for the satisfaction of a physical need.<sup>27</sup> Sexuality *qua* libido thus is not an instinct. What is more, this is all rather banal; it is a universal fact of human being that sexuality is irreducible to sexual reproduction, that it really has nothing to do with organic utility.

Sexuality diverts the living being's quest for satisfaction from its survivalist aims (what Kant would call its pathological determination), whether with regard to the individual or the species, and invests all sorts of activities with a potential for satisfaction that undermines these determinations in favor of an enjoyment that inheres beyond the pleasure principle.

For the student of the unconscious, this is all very basic. What we have to emphasize, however, is that despite all this divergence, the energy of the drive *is* the energy of the organism. It is a materiality which has been repurposed for decidedly inorganic aims, dis-ordered by the imposition of the signifier that splits the living being along the pole of desire, lodging the subject of the unconscious and the impossible object of desire within the logic of fantasy. Lacan, following Freud, occasionally calls the object a hallucination, emphasizing that the subject is inhibited in the actualization of its desire because what it aims at has no place in reality.<sup>28</sup> Fantasy thus mobilizes the energy of the drive, diverting it from its neurophysiological functions which operate in service to the pleasure principle and its endeavor always to reduce or dispel organic tension. As Lacan says, the drive manifests in "the mode of a headless subject, for everything is articulated in it in terms of tension."<sup>29</sup> The body is the organism invested with *jouissance*.

The drive, then, is rather stupid. It is stupid because it is the materialization of fantasy, which is there where I do not think. It dis-orders the organism by way of its investment with a capacity for useless enjoyment, a conversion of organic energy into a surplus that cannot be put to work in service to the system from which it originates and that unworks the system from within. This is the basis of the operative distinction for psychoanalysis between the organism and the body. The body is still material, only it is not identical with its bare materiality since its erotogenic significance inheres in the hole in being where Zupančič locates sexuality and where Lacan positions the logic of fantasy which welds the subject of the unconscious to the impossible object. The body is inscribed with the fantasy, organized according to the logic of fantasy and the quest for the impossible it structures. In this way, we can see that the drive is the mark of a difference *within* the materiality of the body. Sexuality opens the space of this difference, which is best imagined not as a gulf but as a *seam* that both joins and separates the materiality of the organism and the inorganic material of the body according to the work of the drive. The difference matters, in other words, because it is what renders matter different from itself, though it is still matter all the same.

The body is an odd sort of material, indeed. It is a text, a patchwork of erogenous zones, the singular organization of which invites an attunement to the fantasy which inhabits it. Such attunement would involve

making legible the series of inscriptions of the drive, the letters of the body, which distinguish it from its organicity. "To take the body literally," Serge Leclaire explains, means "to learn to spell out the orthography of the name composed by the erotogenic zones that constitute it. It is to recognize in each letter the singularity of the pleasure (or the pain) that that letter fixates, and to identify by the same token the series of objects in play."<sup>30</sup> With psychoanalysis we therefore define the body as the material remainder of the imposition of the signifier, which means it is a site of the unconscious, and it too is structured like a language.

The somatic symptom clearly demonstrates the noncoincidence of these two materialities, the organism and the body, which nevertheless occupy the same space within the same object—the human object. Of the many examples throughout Freud's work, the most infamous and instructive is that of Sergei Pankejeff, the so-called Wolf Man. Confronted with his patient's various resistances—particularly his skepticism toward the efficacy of the treatment—Freud convinces his patient to stick to his analysis by promising to relieve him of his chronic gastric troubles. When Freud later touches on a cluster of signifiers pertaining to Pankejeff's infantile identification with his mother, his analytic suspicions are confirmed; the patient's bowels begin, "like a hysterically affected organ, to 'join in the conversation.'"<sup>31</sup> The stomach is here inscribed with a quantity of libido that subverts its organic digestive purpose. Its joining the conversation is the body responding to the desire of the analyst, the desire to know the truth of the subject, in which the somatic symptom discovers an addressee. From here it is possible to construct the logic of fantasy that unfolds from the Wolf Man's encounter with the fact of castration, which Freud presents in narrative form through the well-known primal scene: an impossible image, a hallucination, which configures Pankejeff within a libidinal dynamic with respect to the father's desire and the *jouissance* of the mother. By moving from construction to formalization, from narrative to structure, Lacan emphasizes that the task of analysis is thus to construct the logic of the relation between the body and the hallucination, the mental representation of the object of desire and the impasse it generates at the level of the signifier, which, again, is the logic of fantasy.

This example prepares our return to the counter-critique we anticipate from new materialists, according to whom the psychoanalytic conception of sex is either an instance of extreme correlationism or a fatal concession to speculative realism. The Wolf Man and Freud's other clinical examples show us that the drive is not a speculative hypothesis but a fact of psychoanalytic experience. Nor is the closed circuit of the drive

a variation on the correlationist circle. For if the trap of correlationism is the appropriation of all immanence to the domain of transcendence, that is, to the transcendental unity of apperception in which Kant located the a priori framework of the subject, we find that the drive evades this trap by revealing a strange materiality *that does not think but nevertheless enjoys*. The spring of this enjoying substance is the intimate exteriority of the unconscious, and the Freudian body therefore is not a reflection of the subject of knowledge, but a refraction of the singularity of the subject which takes its place within the gap in knowledge to which corresponds the gap in being—the ontological lapse: sexuality. This is the true province of the human precisely because it is never at home here, always out of sync with respect to the field of natural determinations in which Kant mistakenly situates the pathology of desire, a strange syncopation whose rhythm can never be coincident with the world in which it subsists. The body is nothing but the inscription of the drive upon the organism which it takes as its canvas, the anchor which secures *jouissance* squarely in the domain of materiality. Clearly, then, the drive cannot be reduced to “mere” physicality, but nor is there anything metaphysical about it.

### The Master and the Pervert

Psychoanalysis therefore defies the charge of correlationism—without, however, accepting that we can simply speculate ourselves out of Kant’s Copernican revolution, whether by winding the clock back to the good old days when Locke had us wondering after primary and secondary qualities, or by reducing all modes of being to a lowest common denominator of sameness (a flat ontology), or by inverting this last move and postulating, with the adherents of panpsychism, that everything sort of thinks and that everything therefore is just as special as the human (which means nothing is special at all), or by following the eliminativist assertion that thought is a cosmic accident in need of a strong dose of humility. All these critical strategies invite skepticism toward the limits and limitations of consciousness only according to a definition of consciousness that imagines the human to be either coincident or noncoincident with every other mode of being, but, in any case, necessarily coincident with itself. It is from this supposition that the critique of correlationism proceeds. Against all this, by tracing the seam of *jouissance* that conjoins and separates the two materialities of the human, that is inscribed by the meandering energy of the drives, that indexes the difference between the



body and the organism, psychoanalysis concerns and is concerned with a difference which is the condition of possibility for an ethical relation to what lies on the other side of consciousness.

Without such an ethics, the relation to this other side remains locked within the repetition of the symptom, bound to the very paradigm it seeks to overturn or sidestep or speculatively subvert. Unless it can account for the *jouissance* that pushes the human beyond and against its determination in the natural order of things—the deathly enjoyment against which, as we have seen, the anthropocentric will to mastery is a defense—new materialism can amount to little more than a hysterical provocation. It can expose the faults in the master's discourse, which is indeed a legitimate foundation from which to mount a true and radical challenge, but in its proliferation of new philosophical critiques of philosophy, its engineering of ever more reasons to move beyond reason, it remains stuck to this same *jouissance*. It enjoys, precisely because such enjoyment is far from pleasurable, that which it claims to despise. In this way, new materialism rehearses a convoluted version of the refrain that Octave Mannoni made famous in his account of the fetishist's disavowal of the knowledge of castration: "I know well, but all the same . . ." The fetishist *knows* well—better than anyone, in fact—that castration is a matter of fact, but *believes* to the contrary in order to maintain a faith in the power of the fetish object.<sup>32</sup> The new materialist iteration of this formula thus might read: "I know well that humans are irreparably bound to language, that thought cannot think beyond itself, but all the same . . ." This is not a recipe for resistance. It is instead a symptomatic attachment to the very thing new materialism wishes most to dispel, since without it there would be no cause for critique, nothing to transgress, no law to break, in its adventure toward the great outdoors.

This, finally, is why new materialism needs psychoanalysis, which can provide its critique of human exceptionalism with a necessary ethical foundation. The ethics of psychoanalysis enjoins a steadfast commitment to the discovery of the always singular way in which the human, each instance of the human, is not coincident with itself. It does not do so by speculating about some great beyond but by calling into question the very distinction between the inside and the outside, the noumenal and the phenomenal, the subject and the object—by troubling *from within* the whole epistemological framework of the Anthropocene. And although psychoanalytic experience humbles—even humiliates—consciousness by revealing that it is always false consciousness, this is only the starting point for the real work of analysis, which is not a technical apparatus or a theoretical schema or a speculative philosophy. It is an injunction to

take responsibility for that which consciousness constitutively represses in its will to mastery.

## Notes

1. There are obviously many differences internal to these general categories, and several of the thinkers with whom we are contending likely would be uneasy about their inclusion under the heading of “new materialism.” We can avoid the nominalist temptation to arbitrate such nuances, however—particularly since this is already a common preoccupation among these thinkers themselves, who need no help in this regard—by instead emphasizing their common foundation: namely, a collective endeavor to retrieve the question of the object from the conception of the transcendental subject.

2. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 7.

3. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), esp. 1–11 and 174–79.

4. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 50; and Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities, 2011).

5. Timothy Morton defines solidarity variously as “the default affective environment of the top layers of the Earth’s crust,” “a deeply pleasant, stirring feeling and political state,” and “being freed from one’s being caught in the past and to have entered a vibrant *nowness* in which the future opens.” Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People* (New York: Verso, 2017), 14, 19.

6. Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 7.

7. Alenka Zupančič, *What IS Sex?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017), 23.

8. Morton calls this “weak correlationism,” arguing that Hegel radicalized it—made it “strong”—by establishing that “the difference between what a thing is and how it appears is internal to the subject,” so that now “the subject is the grand decider of what gets to count as real.” Morton, *Humankind*, 9. Lacan’s own Hegelianism notwithstanding, the Real is absolutely not what the rational subject decides it is. It is rather the result of the insufficiency of any decision from the side of rational consciousness fully to determine its own reality; it is not the completion but the incompleteness of consciousness.

9. Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 3.

10. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 22.

11. *Ibid.*, 7.

12. Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 83.

13. “The transcendental law says: just as appearances must in mere intuition be subject to the formal conditions of space and time, so must appearances in experience be subject to conditions of the necessary unity of apperception—

indeed, this law says that through these conditions alone does any cognition first becomes [*sic*] possible." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason: Unified Edition*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1996), 160.

14. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 80.

15. Jacques Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud," in *Écrits*, 430. For an extended discussion of this point, see Mladen Dolar, "Cogito as the Subject of the Unconscious," in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 11–40.

16. Shaviri, *The Universe of Things*, 9.

17. Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade," in *Écrits*, 645–68.

18. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2002), 94–114.

19. To my knowledge, Lacan's only reference to Whitehead appears in "Kant with Sade," where he asks that the former return the term "eternal object" to psychoanalysis, according to which it would name not the potentiality of beings-in-becoming, but the ossification of the subject who imputes the ethical command to the position of the Other. Lacan, *Écrits*, 656.

20. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), esp. 243–87.

21. Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2007), esp. 48–67; and Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 92.

22. Zupančič writes: "Lacan's gesture, which is often misread as his version of 'correlationism,' consists in introducing a short circuit of the epistemological and ontological levels (of knowledge and being) in the form of their joint/common negativity (lack of knowledge falls into a lack of being)—and the concept of the subject (as subject of the unconscious) is situated at this precise juncture." Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 123.

23. *Ibid.*, 122. Against such solipsism, Zupančič asserts that there is a political dimension to the ontological implications of sexuality: "a true emancipatory politics can be thought only on the ground of an 'object-disoriented ontology,'" an ontology "that pursues not simply being *qua* being, but the crack (the Real, the antagonism) that haunts being from within, informs it" (24).

24. *Ibid.*, 122.

25. The most succinct example of the impasse which is the source of pathogenic ideas is the case of young "Katharina"; see Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 2 (London: Hogarth, 1955), 125–34.

26. Sigmund Freud, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7 (London: Hogarth, 1953), 40–41.

27. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7, 135–245.

28. See, for instance, Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 154.

29. *Ibid.*, 181.

30. Serge Leclaire, *Psychoanalyzing: On the Order of the Unconscious and the Practice of the Letter*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 53. See also Willy Apollon, “The Letter of the Body,” in Apollon, Danielle Bergeron, and Lucie Cantin, *After Lacan: Clinical Practice and the Subject of the Unconscious*, ed. Robert Hughes and Kareen Ror Malone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 103–15.

31. Sigmund Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17 (London: Hogarth, 1955), 76.

32. Octave Mannoni, “‘I Know Well, but All the Same . . . ,’” in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis A. Foster, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 68–92.

# Twisting “Flat Ontology”: Harman’s “Allure” and Lacan’s Extimate Cause

Molly Anne Rothenberg

Correlationism or Causation?

The branch of speculative realism known as object-oriented ontology (OOO) quarrels with Kant’s claim that we cannot know an object at an ontological level, the level of the *Ding an sich*, or “thing-in-itself.” According to OOO adherents, philosophy has for too long bracketed the object-in-itself as an epistemological impossibility. This bracketing they regard as a product of subjectivity, a fault referred to as *correlationism*. Instead, they argue, we should find a way to think the object without the subject. The urgency of this new philosophical project comes across in writers such as Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett, all of whom criticize philosophy for ignoring the scientific discoveries which give prominence to nonhuman actants and systems as determinative of world conditions.<sup>1</sup> Given that humans are not the only agents in the world, it makes sense, these figures claim, to turn to science as a more objective and therefore more reliable descriptor of the world.

Graham Harman, the founder of OOO, shares this sense of urgency, but he rejects the kind of philosophical inquiry fundamental to science proposed by Stengers and Latour because, he argues, that inquiry emphasizes *relations* among objects. Along with some other OOO adherents such as Levi Bryant, Harman prefers a desubjectified and *non-relational* philosophy intended to give insight into the *Ding an sich*. According to Harman, our failure to know the object-in-itself has nothing to do with the epistemological limitations of the subject but is due to the fact that the object withdraws *from itself*. For Harman, the object-in-itself has neither qualities nor relations: it is withdrawn into its own recesses, which are inaccessible to other objects, including subjects. With this move, Harman, in what Žižek calls a “quasi-magical reversal of epistemological obstacle into ontological premise,” turns the Kantian epistemological insight—*our* failure to know the object—into an ontological

fact, a property of the object itself.<sup>2</sup> This is the basis of Žižek's insight that Harman's project requires the frame of transcendental subjectivity.

Žižek's criticisms of OOO will strike a chord with Lacanians, since they call to mind, albeit in a distorted way, the Imaginary operation that transforms the impossibility of the *objet petit a* into its fantasied prohibition, which is a crucial step in the process of subjectivization. In Lacan's theory, the subject is produced by the intervention of the signifier, which creates the impression that the individual has lost something crucial to itself, something it possessed prior to the advent of the signifier. In truth, however, with the cut of the signifier something has indeed transpired, but nothing has been lost. *Objet a* is merely the fantasy of a substantialized object that is imagined to rectify the so-called loss accompanying subjectivization. Because no such object actually exists, it is impossible to recover. The Imaginary operation, then, transforms the ontological impossibility of *objet a* into its *provisional* inaccessibility, serving as the cause of the subject's desire to remedy its "loss." This inaccessibility is imagined to derive from a prohibition, not from impossibility, so that the subject can fantasize that the object of its desire—the "missing" object—would be accessible if the prohibition were transgressed.

By contrast, Harman attributes our inability to access the object to a quality inherent to the object. This quality of the "real" object prevents us from accessing it in that it withdraws the object from all relations, *including its relation to itself*. In the Lacanian case, a nonexistent impossible object is made to seem available to a subject; in the Harmanian case, an existing object is conceived to be unavailable even to itself, in effect rendering it an impossible object. While Lacan invents his strange *objet a* in order to explain how the object of the subject's desire also causes the subject, Harman invents his model of a withdrawn-from-itself object in order to work out a theory of causality that would resolve, once and for all, the Humean problem of how the cause "touches" the effect, without relying on subjective perception or intention. By attending to the fun-house mirror kinship between these two conceptions of the object, we will see that Harman's invention fails to expel the subject from his ontology, but it could have succeeded in theorizing causation with the help of Lacan.

We can get oriented to Harman's interest in causation from his essay "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer," in which he rejects models of the object that are either wholly determined by external relations (context) or those wholly determined by internal relations, by pursuing an analogy to two literary theories that are concerned with exploring the relationship of text to context: New Historicism and New Criticism. He criticizes philosophers who depend upon external relations because they risk dissolving the object into its set of immediate contextual determinants:

What is truly interesting about “contexts” is not that they utterly define every entity to the core, but that they open a space where *certain* interactions and effects can take place and not others. There is no reason to descend the slippery slope and posit a general relational ontology in which all things are utterly defined by even the most trivial aspects of their context. Here as in the case of Heidegger’s hammer, if all objects were completely determined by the structure or context in which they resided, there is no reason why anything would ever change, since a thing would be nothing more than its current context. For any change to be possible, objects must be an excess or surplus outside their current range of relations, vulnerable to some of those relations but insensible to others—just as a hammer is shattered by walls and heavy weights but not by the laughter of an infant.<sup>3</sup>

In literary studies, this stance corresponds to that of New Historicism, which conceives of the literary text as nothing other than the bundle of *external/contextual* relations determining it. By contrast, as Harman’s allusion to Cleanth Brooks’s famous essay collection *The Well-Wrought Urn* suggests, New Criticism considers the poem to be an object completely set off from its relations to other objects, which would seem to make the poem the kind of object Harman conceives. But unfortunately, New Criticism also conceives of the poem as nothing *other* than the bundle of *external/contextual* relations determining it. Both approaches, then, reduce the object to its relations.

Harman’s corrective is a model of the object that is “deeply non-relational” yet also capable of interacting with other objects, paradoxically by virtue of its non-relationality, or what Harman describes as the withdrawn-from-itself dimension of the object. What is at stake for him in this model is a coherent account of how newness enters the world without any reliance on subjective intentionality or point of view. So although Harman (and everyone else working in this movement) claims that speculative realism is above all concerned to criticize Kant’s “correlationism,” at least in Harman’s case the abiding attraction seems to be the question of causation. One way to understand OOO, he says in a response to Steven Shaviro’s critique, is as “the true philosophy of becoming and events.”<sup>4</sup> Refuting Shaviro’s claim that he “tends to underestimate the importance of change over the course of time,” Harman argues that it is only by thinking of objects as “holding something in reserve from their current relations [that] objects are prepared to enter new ones”: “Shaviro seems to hold that if objects are withheld from other objects, they are stripped of all dynamism, though in fact such withholding is what makes all dynamism possible.”<sup>5</sup> Harman considers Shaviro’s “most unfortunate

philosophical assumption" to be "that relations must be associated with change."<sup>6</sup> Harman stakes a claim in this essay to a new, non-relational model of causation, which he says will be the focus of his next work.

Philosophy has a perennial interest in the puzzle of causation—how does the cause "touch" its effect while remaining distinct from it? As I have discussed elsewhere, the classic *non-subjective* models of causality (that is, the non-Humean approaches) take two forms which we can exemplify by the Marxist base-superstructure model and the Foucaultian "field of forces" model.<sup>7</sup> In the first, a two-tier model, the cause is exceptional to the field of its effects, which allows for a "scientific" disentanglement of cause from effect. Unfortunately, this model sequesters causes from their effects, so that nothing remains to guarantee the very connection between the cause and the field of its effects. For if the cause is radically other than its effects, if it is not *in some way* part of the field it produces, then it cannot be seen in relation to that field *as its cause*. In fact, the very field of effects itself threatens to fall apart, since nothing holds its elements together in relation to each other: the cause that could do so is fatally sequestered from the field. For convenience, I refer to this model as *external causation*.

In the second causal model, exemplified by Foucault, the cause is immanent to the field of its effects: "It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization."<sup>8</sup> By this means, Foucault links causes directly with their effects. However, again unfortunately, the cause and its effects are brought so close together that the two sides collapse into one: anything can be a cause of anything or everything, which means that it is impossible to distinguish a cause from its effects. The cause is dissolved within the very positivity of the relation it supposedly produces. I refer to this model as *immanent causation*.

Harman does not talk in these terms, but his work is peppered with references to the importance of thinking through the problems of these incompatible models. Speaking of Whitehead and Latour, for instance, he points out that

if you deny that an object is something lurking beneath its current state of affairs, then you end up with a position that cannot adequately explain change; you will have an occasionalist theory of isolated, discrete instants. . . . The exact opposite is true for such thinkers as Bergson and Deleuze, for whom becoming is what is primarily real, and discrete individual entities are derivative of this more primal flux or flow. This position merely has the opposite problem, since it cannot explain how such



a primary becoming could ever be broken up into independent zones or districts, let alone full-blown individuals.<sup>9</sup>

Taking up the problem in a different way, Harman locates these two positions in Whitehead himself. Harman argues that Whitehead has to propose a dualistic ontology in order to account both for change and for individual actual entities: positing an undifferentiated state (Whitehead's "continuity") of potentiality in "eternal objects" provides the tangency necessary for causation but undermines the status of any actual entities engaging in that causation ("when everything changes, nothing does"), while atomized actual entities "happen in causal independence of each other."<sup>10</sup> In our terms, the first part of Whitehead's dual ontology corresponds to immanent causation, while the second part corresponds to external causation.

As Harman sees it, the greatest difficulty in accounting for causation resides in the relational model (immanent causation) because it dissolves the object into its relations, leaving nothing for causality to work upon. Latour's and Bennett's neovitalist writings, like all immanentist (Spinozist) theories, fall into this category. Harman's counterargument proposes that "objects are somehow deeper than their relations, and cannot be dissolved into them": "I contend that becoming happens only by way of some non-relational reality. An object needs to form a new connection in order to change, and this entails that an object must disengage from its current state and *somehow make contact with something with which it was not previously in direct contact*. My entire philosophical position, in fact, is designed to explain how such happenings are possible."<sup>11</sup> That is, Harman sets out to develop a model of the object specifically in response to the problem of causation. He designs an ontology that he thinks will deliver him from immanent causation without creating the difficulties of external causation. Avoiding the Scylla of dissolution in the immanent causal model, how does Harman elude the Charybdis of sequestration from causality in his own?

### Withdrawn, Exhausted, and Alluring Objects

What does Harman mean by "holding something in reserve"? He doesn't mean, as one might imagine, that different features of the object are called into play at different times depending on contextual determinants. Rather, he means that some part of the object is permanently non-

relational, cordoned off in an inaccessible recessed core. Such a reserve is needed because without it, he argues, the object's features could be so fully engaged that the object could never again enter into new relations: "If a thing is fully exhausted or deployed in its current relations, with nothing held in reserve, then there is no reason that any current situation of the world would ever change."<sup>12</sup> It is hard to make sense of this claim. Some interactions take place with respect to specific features of the object at any given time, while others do not. So, does this mean that the *unactivated features* constitute a permanently inaccessible reserve? In that case, they would cease to be "features" and would have no part to play in any change. Or are we to imagine that some interaction could *exhaust* the object, in the sense of using up its entire capacity for further interactions? But even if every feature of the object were engaged in a given interaction, how exactly would that prevent the object from encountering another context that engages some or all of those features?

Harman relies on the connotations of the word "exhausted" to make it seem as though an interaction that fully engaged all of the object's features would somehow *deplete* the object, rendering it incapable of interacting with other objects in the future.<sup>13</sup> Yet, obviously, even if every feature of the object were revealed or engaged in a given interaction, that would not destroy the object, remove the object from the environment, or make time stop: it wouldn't prevent the object from coming into contact with other objects or conditions at a different time, since many interactions that involve the object are initiated by objects, conditions, and events outside the object. Because we don't live in a world at absolute zero, the object necessarily interacts with an environment that can change it. Energy is lost, temperature fluctuates, gravity comes into play, another animate object bumps into it. Objects have specific features that differentially interact with their environments (the basis of all scientific investigation), and an environment—other objects, events, and conditions—does not require a special property of the object-in-itself in order to interact with the object.

Harman seems to acknowledge this point, at least at times. He even makes the argument, apparently against the interests of his own claims, that the environment is the source of change: "We return dozens of times to the same faculty gathering with nothing of note ever happening—but then one day we have a conversation or meet a person who changes our lives. Dangerous chemicals sit side by side in a warehouse with nothing happening—but then one day an interaction is triggered and they explode."<sup>14</sup> Apart from the obvious question of temporality (why "one day" and not another?), we are left wondering why Harman insists on the object's *permanent* non-relational reserve as requisite for entering into new

relations when he acknowledges the role of the environment in triggering interactions. Why not assume that the features not in play in interaction T1 could come into play at T2-n? Why propose that some dimension of the object is permanently withdrawn from all relations?

As an accomplished philosopher, Harman is unlikely to leave this problem unaddressed, so let's look again at the model he proposes: "I endorse the model of a non-relational actuality, devoid of potential, but containing reserves for change insofar as it is withheld from relations. . . . By holding something in reserve from their current relations, my objects are prepared to enter new ones."<sup>15</sup> The object he designs to meet this criterion has two parts—a core of absolute non-relationality and a surface of relational features, capable of interaction. Unfortunately, as we will see, this two-tier object simply reproduces the problem of external causation *inside* the object. Then, in order to resolve the problem he has created for himself, he proposes a bridge between the features of the object and its hidden reserve, inventing a mysterious property of the object which he calls "allure."

Here is Shaviro's description of allure, a description endorsed by Harman: "[It] is the attraction of something that has retreated into its own depths. An object is alluring when it does not just display particular qualities, but also insinuates the existence of something deeper, something hidden and inaccessible, something that cannot actually be displayed. . . . To be allured is to be beckoned into a realm that cannot ever be reached."<sup>16</sup> Allure, then, is neither an object nor a surface feature. It is a force inherent to the recessed object which makes it possible for the object to "disengage from its current state and somehow make contact with something with which it was not previously in direct contact."

"Beckoned into a realm that cannot ever be reached." Given Harman's work on Husserl in his *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, it is not surprising to find echoes of phenomenology in his model, for "allure" is Harman's (mis)appropriation of the Husserlian horizon of indeterminacy. For Husserl, the object exists in a variety of ways vis-à-vis consciousness. It may exist in time, in space, from a particular vantage, in regard to its color or relation to other objects, and so on. No act of consciousness can completely grasp the object, if only because an act occurs in the present and the object endures through time. As Husserl explains, "What is actually perceived, and what is more or less clearly co-present and determinate (to some extent at least), is partly pervaded, partly girt about with a *dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality*. . . . Moreover, the zone of indeterminacy is infinite. The misty horizon that can never be completely outlined remains necessarily there."<sup>17</sup> That is, the object, in Husserl's terms, necessarily *transcends* the intentional act that

fixes its meaning (*Sinn*) for consciousness. This indeterminate horizon draws consciousness to it.

Understanding consciousness is Husserl's purpose, and his method requires that we put aside considerations of the object-in-itself, suspending even "the idea of the natural world," so that intentional acts—the subject's bestowal of meaning or recognition—can be apprehended and consciousness itself interrogated. Husserl calls this suspension of interest in the object as such the phenomenological reduction, or *epochē*. What makes it possible to interrogate consciousness by means of the *epochē* is the fact that transcendence or indeterminacy is part of our normal experience of the object. This horizon, as boundary, partakes both of the determinacy of the present and the indeterminacy of that which escapes the present act of consciousness. Husserl claims that this dual nature of the horizon is what permits consciousness to consolidate into a *cogito*, mediating the passage of one present moment into the next. The movement of consciousness, its ability to go through successive experiences without their breaking into isolated moments, depends upon the transcendence inherent to the intentional act of consciousness.<sup>18</sup> Indeterminacy keeps consciousness in motion, drawing consciousness toward ever more intentional acts to determine *Sinn*.<sup>19</sup> Phenomenology places the object-in-itself in brackets (the *epochē*) in order to make this movement of consciousness apprehensible.

In his *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, Harman finds this account compelling as well as suggestive: the Husserlian horizon which draws consciousness toward repeated intentional acts is transformed in Harman's work into the object's inherent attractiveness on account of its inaccessibility. He describes the *epochē* as if it has nothing to do with bracketing the existence of the object and everything to do with bracketing consciousness: "The eidetic reduction tries to arrive at the essential kernel of a thing by varying its modes of appearance and stripping away the more transient features until we gain direct intuition into its essence."<sup>20</sup> Harman's claim notwithstanding, Husserl's "eidetic reduction" does not concern the object's essence: it refers to "an unfolding of abstract features shared by appropriate sets of fictitious or real-life examples, by way, e.g., of free imaginative variation on an arbitrarily chosen initial example."<sup>21</sup> The eidetic reduction, in other words, puts out of play the veridical existence of the external world, including the object-in-itself. Contrary to Harman's representation, Husserl brackets the object precisely because the focus of the inquiry is *consciousness*, not the object: "the *epochē* has us focus on those aspects of our intentional acts and their contents that do not depend on the existence of a represented object out there in the extra-mental world."<sup>22</sup> The phenomenological method describes *perceptual* content; it

takes place from a first-person point of view, and therefore can never distinguish between hallucination and actuality.

So, Harman's reading constitutes a serious misprision. He wants to borrow from Husserl the attractiveness (*to consciousness*) of the indeterminate horizon without bringing consciousness into it. "Allure" is his way of doing so, in that allure is supposed to account for the way that one object senses another, wants to come into contact with another, attracts another. That is, allure is meant to take advantage of all of the properties of conscious activity by attributing them to objects.<sup>23</sup>

But I don't want to suggest that we necessarily have to disqualify Harman's model on the basis of his misrepresentation of Husserl. Rather, my purpose is to show how Harman's interest in causality brings him within sight of a solution already proposed by Lacan. So, let's grant that there *is* such a property X or "allure" inherent to the object-in-itself. How does allure help Harman with his causal project? In two ways. First, it provides the motive *force* by means of which one permanently withdrawn object can come into new relations with another. Objects, this model presumes, are attracted to one another on account of their allure. Despite being withdrawn from *all* relations, such objects nonetheless are imagined to enter into new relations without compromising their withdrawnness and non-relationality. That is, "allure" would bring the object into a relation with other objects, but only at the surface level: Harman insists on this point so as to safeguard the non-relational inaccessibility of the recessed core of the object, which is supposed to be the source of its attraction. Second, "allure" not only attracts other objects, but provides the contact between the surface and the depth of an object, the tangency between these two levels of the object. Remember that Harman has rejected both immanent and external causation, so, to serve his purposes, his causal model has to offer both a means for objects to remain distinct from their relations (no contextual dissolution) and a means for them to contact each other despite their hard-shelled identities (no sequestration). The same applies to the different "objects" *inside* the object.

The twin premises of Harman's theory are that we need the object-in-itself in order to prevent "exhaustion"/stasis and we need to think of the object-in-itself as "alluring" in order to provide the motive force ("the mechanism," "the means to get there") of causation. "Allure," then, is invented to overcome the dissolution inherent in immanent causation. It is how Harman turns an object into a causal agent.

The specifics of his argument are important. According to Harman, allure is the "mechanism by which objects are split apart from their traits even as these traits remain inseparable from their objects."<sup>24</sup> With this stroke, Harman sketches a two-tiered object, an unchanging deep "uni-

tary reality" (the withdrawn object) coupled with a constantly changing surface of traits that somehow are connected to this deep unitary—and non-relational—reality. Harman refers to these surface traits as "notes," the parts of the object that interact with other objects and that (again somehow) are objects as well. In Harman's model, objects do not "confront each other directly, but only brush up against one another's notes": he makes this point in order to sustain the idea that interactions are not sticky, that features can engage and disengage. (A "note" is another convenient metaphor for Harman, because unlike solid objects, a musical note conveys transience and immateriality, as well as the ability to affect an auditor: that is, unlike a handle or a hammer-head, the semantic field associated with the "note" does a lot of the work for him.) "Notes," then, can enter into a certain kind of interaction—unlike the core, they are relational—but these interactions don't affect the core itself, what Harman is referring to as "the object" in these passages. Nor do these interactions risk "exhausting" the object. As he says, "the relation of objects must always be indirect or vicarious, since no object can enter fully into any interaction."<sup>25</sup>

But because the object-in-itself is a "non-relational reality" and the notes that interact with other objects are both relational and somehow the product of the non-relational core, Harman needs something to bridge the gap between the withdrawn object and the notes: "Allure invites us toward another level of reality (the unified object) and also gives us the means to get there (the notes that belong to both our current level and the distant one)."<sup>26</sup> Here he reproduces the problem he is trying to solve, configuring the object as having two tiers that, by his own definition, cannot be in relation to one another. He tries to get around this problem by suggesting that the non-relational core of the object produces a force ("allure") that brings into existence surface features ("notes") which then provide the connection between surface and depth. Now we have a notional and mysterious force, like the ether, that has to be presupposed in order to link the non-relational part of the object to the relational part without (somehow) bringing them into relation.<sup>27</sup> Calling this relationship "vicarious" only wishes the problem away, since it implies that the recessed core is somehow using the surface features as its relational stand-ins, which only begs the question as to what enables the communication between the two.

Thanks to his dislike of immanent causation, Harman has mired himself in the problem of external causation, insisting on a two-tiered object and risking absolute sequestration of the withdrawn object from all causality. As he says, "the real problem is not how beings interact in a system. Instead, the problem is how they withdraw from that system as

independent realities while somehow communicating through the proximity, the touching without touching, that has been termed allusion or allure.”<sup>28</sup> So, unfortunately, to solve this problem Harman imports a causal mechanism (allure) for which he cannot account, the very mechanism he is trying to explain.

Undaunted, Harman makes yet another attempt to hold true to his commitment to a core non-relational object sequestered from (but “somehow” in contact with) its surface traits: “When we say that one object encounters another, what this means is that it makes contact with the *strife* between the unitary reality [its hidden recess] and specific notes of its neighbor.”<sup>29</sup> This is Harman’s most suggestive move. Here we are confronted with an object withdrawn from all relations, *including relations with itself*, that nonetheless has a dimension that can enter into relations (if it could not, there could be no change), but not because notes/surface features are interacting, as he had previously indicated. Rather, in his new solution, the *object-in-itself* must contend with the same problem that Harman is trying to solve: this object registers the *contradiction* between another object’s interactive surface and its non-relational core. The object, in effect, *reacts* to the paradoxical nature of all objects-in-themselves. While it remains unclear how this move solves his problem, at this point Harman crosses into Lacanian territory.

### The Search for a Möbius Topology and Extimate Causality

So, to recap, Harman is trying to develop a new model of causation that would help him avoid both relational dissolution and objectal isolation. In his view, without the aloofness or withdrawnness of the object-in-itself, there would be no allure, and without allure there would be no motive force for the tangency needed for interaction. But the model of the object so conceived divides it spatially into two discrete parts that have no relationship with each other, thereby undermining his causal project. He posits “allure” to (mysteriously) bridge that gap without fatally compromising non-relationality.

The problem he has created for himself is actually more difficult, if that were possible, for in his account the non-relational core of the object, its withdrawn recess, is itself split between its non-relationality and its relational force. This recessed core, then, is paradoxical, both relational and non-relational, both itself and not-itself. Bennett, among others, finds this paradox disqualifying. Harman, she says, “finds himself

theorizing a kind of relation—'communication'—between objects. He tries to insulate this object-to-object encounter from depictions that *also* locate activity in the relationships themselves or at the systemic level of operation, but I do not think that this parsing attempt succeeds."<sup>30</sup> Harman continues to insist, however, that his object's topology is not paradoxical. Despite his highly creative effort to resolve this paradox, he has made it impossible to get where he wants to go precisely because he has misunderstood the value of paradox to his enterprise.

Harman seems never to have considered that there are *actual* paradoxical objects in our real world, objects the topology of which seems to controvert Aristotle's law of noncontradiction. An entire system of logic, "nonclassical" or "paraconsistent" logic, has arisen from this insight into the inapplicability of the law of noncontradiction to these objects. Topologists refer to such objects as *non-orientable*: Klein bottles and Möbius bands are the most familiar examples.

Non-orientable objects have a "twist" in their spatial configuration that undermines any firm division between inside and outside. So, for example, a Möbius band has only *one* side thanks to the twist, but any given point seems to be located on *one of two* sides. This twist renders every part of the non-orientable object non-determinate with respect to its internal or external location. In effect, every point is excessive with respect to the determination of its "sidedness."

This excess offers the solution that Harman is (or ought to be) seeking. Recall that for Harman the object is "excessive" insofar as no interaction completely "exhausts" the object. But in the non-orientable object, the excess is *everywhere*, altering the apparently rigid boundary between sides (or between cause and effect). Non-determinate sidedness means that causes are not quarantined from their effects *because* the excess brings them into contiguity. At the same time, these points and their relations have a certain specifiability; they do not merge into one another as they do in the infinite flux of immanentism. There is no "distance" or spatial gap between inside and outside, surface and depth, to be bridged. The object *itself* is more than one but not quite two, through and through.

From this perspective, Harman's error is not that he has generated a paradoxical object, but rather that he is trying to wish the paradox away. If Harman had described his object as a non-orientable object, that is, as having no part that is not withdrawn and no part that is completely withdrawn, he would not have had to propose some inexplicable property to repair the object he himself has split in two. A Möbius topology "allows" the object both the internal tangencies and the separations that Harman is trying to devise. Harman invents an object that is "excessive," but he



does not understand the nature of this excess in a way that allows him to theorize a new form of causality. Without this understanding, Harman is stymied by his own topological assumptions and his commitment to an idea of the object as concretely divided into other objects.<sup>31</sup>

When Jacques Lacan needed to devise a new kind of object and a new kind of causation to account for subjectivization, he drew from these non-orientable objects. He found that the paradox inherent to non-orientable objects is indispensable for explicating a causal relationship that neither dissolves into contextual relations nor isolates the object. I have discussed this causal model at length elsewhere, so I will just briefly describe it here.<sup>32</sup> Lacan's purposes are different from Harman's, of course. Lacan devises what I will call "extimate causality" in order to explain the advent and structure of the subject, while Harman believes his causal mechanism explains the structure of the object. I will address that difference below, but for now we can note that Lacan and Harman take up the same problem inherent to causation and that their solutions bear a family resemblance to each other.

In the psychoanalytic framework (made explicit by Badiou), there is an important distinction between *things* and *objects*.<sup>33</sup> Things have no predicates, properties, or relations; they exist in a state of *being* that has no orienting or relational point of access. Such an entity is the *Ding an sich*. Objects, by contrast, do have identities, properties, and relations. We interact with objects, not with things. We can rename Badiouan things as Harmanian "withdrawn objects" and Badiouan objects as Harmanian "surface features."

To transform a being-thing into an object in a Lacanian ontology, that is, to generate an object with identifiable features and relational capacity, the state of sheer (non-relational, featureless) *Being* has to be nullified. The mechanism for this qualified nullification is the addition of a *formal negation* to the state of Being. In order for things to acquire properties and relations—to become objects—there must be some point of orientation: this point is provided by the formal negation which adds no content whatsoever, but is merely a "cut" that traverses the entire state of Being. I think of this cut or formal negation as the addition of the empty set to a sheer welter of disparate things.<sup>34</sup> The empty set does not add any content—it has no substantive properties—but it allows the *set* of elements to share one property and one relationship at minimum: their belonging to the set. The formal negation is a mere function, but one that has a substantial effect, establishing a minimal relationship of difference and identity among all the things it brings together in relationship to itself.<sup>35</sup>

In effect, the empty set/formal negation is a cause that is both immanent to and external to the field of its effects. Adding the formal

negation to a thing adds a contentless cut that operates throughout it and keeps it from fully coinciding with itself: this negation of the thing's self-coincidence is what *makes it an object*. The cut (the lack or minimal self-difference) persists after the object is precipitated from the thing. It produces from the thing an object that is inherently *different from itself*. In this framework, the object is the thing plus the formal negation. The negation is both what keeps the object from fully coinciding with itself and what generates the object *per se*. Thus, the formal negation is a special kind of cause, what we can call the "extimate cause," using Lacan's neologism (extimacy) to indicate the essential presence of an externality for identity. The formal negation provides the cut, present everywhere but nowhere in particular, that is necessary to bring an object from sheer *being* into our world. The formal negation, so to speak, acts as external cause. At the same time, the minimal difference that turns a thing into an object, making the object non-self-coincident, adheres to the object as its internal cause. In other words, the paradoxical object always is different from itself in order to *be* itself. We can think of this non-self-coincidence in terms of the excess of the non-orientable object. Even as the extimate cause precipitates objects with specific properties and relations out of a state of indifferentiation and monadic unrelatedness, it inevitably gives rise to the same excess evident in the Möbius topology, in which every point on the band is both determinate and indeterminate, both itself and not-itself, through and through.

It may be obvious now why I regard Harman's idea that the object interacts with the problematic split in the other object as promising. It is the first step toward recognizing that the "cut" in the object is essential to its identity, a step toward recognizing its utility and theorizing its function as extimate. Of course, Harman doesn't theorize the formal negation: instead, he treats it as just another substantive property (like allure) that provides the boundary between surface and depth (and hence the link between them). But boundaries are similar to extimacy, having the paradoxical property of belonging to and not belonging to the elements they separate. With a shift in perspective, Harman might have seen that this boundary is not locatable in the way that he imagines, that is, as a dividing line between the recess and the surface. Instead, in non-orientable objects, the "cut" creates an excess at every point in the object, dividing it from itself everywhere. Whereas Harman envisions the object's excessive dimension to be its recessed, non-relational core, in a Lacanian model the *cut* (negation, operation of the signifier) is the excessive dimension of the object, a dimension operating everywhere in the object, not as a split between two parts. The excess generated by the cut of minimal self-inconsistency is the topological structure that Harman seeks.

So the extimate cause answers to Harman's purposes by avoiding

the twin perils of immanent and external causation. It generates objects out of the *Ding an sich* (as Harman imagines “allure” to do). And it structures each object with an excess that is essential for new relations to occur. Even if his account is flawed, we might say that “allure” is Harman’s word for extimate causality, crossing as it does the “divide” between the object-in-itself and its features without changing either.

It is striking that Harman’s search for a new model of causality, which is by definition a temporal process, would lead him to emphasize the object’s spatial structure rather than its temporality as the key to causality. In order to proscribe the possibility that the object is composed only of surface features, some of which are activated at one time or another, he thinks that he has to leave temporality out of his account, although he tacitly reimports it. One way that he obscures the temporal activation of surface features is by recasting it as “potentiality,” which he labels a “bad concept” because “it allows us to borrow the future achievements of an entity in advance, without specifying where and how this potential is inscribed in the actual.”<sup>36</sup> But his signature method of avoiding an explanation for a temporal process is to call up (the mystery of) allure’s attraction, its creation of notes, and the spatial “brushing up” of one note to another. These are obviously *causal* processes. So he is caught in a *petitio principii*, deploying a causative process to explain causation per se. In other words, Harman desperately needs another paradox—albeit an explicable one—to resolve the puzzle of causation. He needs the paradox of a cause that causes itself, in a retroversive process. This paradox can be stated in many ways; Žižek prefers “*the subject is itself the wound it tries to heal*.”<sup>37</sup>

We can foresee an objection from Harman: he will say that his model is *non-subjective*, whereas the Lacanian model is created to account for the subject. But this objection lacks force, not only because Harman has endowed his objects with the attributes of consciousness, but also because his concept of the subject is so far from Lacan’s. As has been emphasized repeatedly by Lacanian theorists, the subject is not the Cartesian cogito. For Lacan, the subject is nothing but the “cut” of the formal negation. As Sbriglia and Žižek explain in the introduction to this volume, what neo-realist philosophies such as OOO understand as subject “simply fails to meet the criteria of the subject,” because they conceive of subject as experiencing, as acting, as positing objects, that is, as a substantialized entity.<sup>38</sup> OOO does not understand that both subject and object emerge in and as the very cut that produces the non-self-coincidence as a *sine qua non* of identity. What is needed is an account of what Žižek calls the “presubjective process of subjectivization.”<sup>39</sup> The subject is produced by the cut of the formal negation, the signifier that inaugurates a gap within

the experiencing individual. This cut divides the individual from the immediacy of reality, generating a gap that makes it seem as though some piece of "reality" has been lost. That gap *is itself* the subject.

This Lacanian subject is correlative to the Lacanian *objet a*. Žižek explains that the "object-cause of desire is something that . . . is nothing at all, just a void," and the same is true of the subject.<sup>40</sup> Neither subject nor *objet a* is a substantialized entity. In fact, *objet a* is nothing other than the substantialization of the cut, produced in order to "repair" the subject's own gap. The signifier's subversion of the immediacy of the individual to itself negates "objective reality" and installs a piece of the Real, a void, in its place. This loss of immediacy is substantialized as *objet a*, making the illusion of subject-as-substance emerge. *Objet a*, then, is the fantasied substantialization of the void of the subject. Both subject and object are traversed by the formal negation, which does not divide them in two but rather renders them self-inconsistent in the sense that a Möbius band is self-inconsistent. The withdrawal into the void at the core of both subject and object (the "cutting of the links with reality," as Žižek puts it) is also the means by which subject and object relate.<sup>41</sup> This relation is known as "extimacy": the objectal correlative to the void of the subject is the "object-cause of desire" (*objet a*), a cause that is both outside of and inherent to (necessarily inside) the subject, an object that makes subjectivity possible (and vice versa).

What brings the subject into being—the cut—is misrecognized as the impediment to the subject's wholeness rather than being properly conceived as the void that is the fundament of its existence and identity. By creating the illusion that this void can be filled by an *objet a* accessible through transgression, the process of subjectivization via the signifier installs desire in the subject's *objet a*. The fantasied *objet a* is imagined to be able to remove the "cut" in the subject, although if this were possible the subject itself would disappear. At the same time, the status of the subject *qua* subject requires the creation of *objet a*. Thus, in the process of subjectivization, *objet a* functions both as the *object* of (effect) and the *cause* of that desire. This process has a paradoxically retroversive temporality.

From a Lacanian standpoint, OOO fails to distinguish between reality, or the universe of relations among actually existing entities, and the Real, or the cut in the subject/object that generates non-self-coincidence. Both object and subject in the Lacanian framework have the same Möbius topology—both are self-inconsistent and both are coextensive with the cut. (It is in this sense that subject and object are correlative, not "correlational," as OOO would have it.) The cut belongs to the Real, which means that both subject and object partake of the Real as well. Sbriglia and Žižek point out the subjectivity that haunts OOO's conception of

a purely objective world without subjects by focusing on the Real status of both subject and object. As they explain, what object-oriented ontologists describe as a subjectless world of objects is “too subjective, already caught within an unproblematized transcendental horizon. . . . We reach the In-itself not by tearing away subjective appearances and trying to isolate ‘objective reality’ as it is ‘out there,’ independently of the subject”; rather, “the In-itself inscribes itself precisely into the subjective excess, the subjective gap or inconsistency, that opens up a hole in reality.”<sup>42</sup> The “hole in reality” is the cut in the object—this is all there is to the “object-in-itself.” What Harman takes to be the object-in-itself in “actuality” is nothing other than the Real of the cut that makes the subject correlative to *objet a*. The “actual” is not reality, as Harman would have it. Rather, it is the Real—featureless, non-relational, unsymbolizable, omnipresent, and causal. The object-in-itself is nothing—nothing more nor less than the cut that precipitates the object from the thing. This is the only kind of object that can answer to Harman’s purposes.

*Objet a* has a dual structure, although it is not quite the same one that Harman attributes to his object as core/surface, since *objet a* is both substantialized (object of desire) and permanently inaccessible (a void). If such an object has “allure,” this is because it is an *object-cause of desire*—*objet a*—not a “withdrawn” object among other objects. As *objet a*, it comes into existence with the fantasy that the gap—in Harman’s case, the gap between the recessed core and the surface features—can be remediated (the job of “allure”). So while Harman works very hard to eliminate subjectivity, he himself supplies the framework of fantasy that makes the object appear as substance rather than as what it truly is, a “weird, alien object which is nothing but the inscription of the subject itself into the field of objects in the guise of a stain that acquires form only when part of this field is anamorphically distorted by the subject’s desire.”<sup>43</sup> Harman’s desire for extimate causality, unbeknownst to himself, has brought him within reach of a dialectical materialist conception of *objet a*. *Wo es war . . .*

## Notes

1. See, for instance, Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).

2. Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 57.

3. Graham Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism," *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (2012): 191.

4. Graham Harman, "Response to Shaviro," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 300.

5. *Ibid.*, 300–301.

6. *Ibid.*, 293.

7. See my *The Excessive Subject: A New Theory of Social Change* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2010), esp. 5–10.

8. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 92.

9. Harman, "Response to Shaviro," 295.

10. *Ibid.*, 298, 300, 298.

11. *Ibid.*, 295, 300; emphasis added.

12. *Ibid.*, 297.

13. It may be worth noting that Harman proposes that rhetoric is more important than argument in philosophy: rhetoric, he opines, is not "vile manipulation" but instead presents us with "what the truth *ought* to look like" (*ibid.*, 302), which convinces us more than any argument. This position, which he readily admits foregrounds hunches, intuitions, and aesthetic appreciation, is just one of the ways in which Harman departs from accepted norms of philosophical inquiry, a point of evident pride for Harman.

14. *Ibid.*, 299.

15. *Ibid.*, 299, 300.

16. Steven Shaviro, "The Actual Volcano: Whitehead, Harman, and the Problem of Relations," in *The Speculative Turn*, 289.

17. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 102.

18. As Christian Beyer puts it, in Husserl's view, "we have to look upon intentional acts as momentary components of certain transtemporal cognitive structures—*dynamic intentional structures*—in which one and the same object or state of affairs is represented throughout a period of time during which the subject's cognitive perspective upon that object or state of affairs is constantly changing." Christian Beyer, "Edmund Husserl," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (winter 2016 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/husserl/>.

19. Jean Starobinski makes a similar argument in his essay "Poppaea's Veil," in which he discusses the strange appeal of "the hidden" (*le caché*): it is this hidden realm that draws our "gaze" (*regard*)—"an intentional relation with others and with the horizon of experience" (*relation intentionnelle avec les autres et l'horizon vécu*). Jean Starobinski, *The Living Eye*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3. In both cases, the indeterminate or (temporarily) inaccessible side of the object attracts consciousness.

20. Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 30.

21. Beyer, "Edmund Husserl."
22. Ibid.
23. For Harman's attempts to turn Husserl to account in this way, see "Part One" of his *Guerrilla Metaphysics*.
24. Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 173.
25. Ibid., 174.
26. Ibid., 179.
27. In *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, Harman actually promotes this concept of the ether when discussing Husserl's phenomenology: "If the intentional objects of perception are linked with their qualities by means of this ether of loose carnal properties, the same turns out to be true of the relation of an inanimate substance with its own qualities, and of all such substances with each other" (3). The ether functions in the same way as allure.
28. Graham Harman, "Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human," *Naked Punch* 9 (2007), [www.nakedpunch.com/articles/147](http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/147).
29. Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 174.
30. Jane Bennett, "Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontology," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 228.
31. Iain Hamilton Grant also notices a different but related topological issue in Harman's proposal: "anteriority does not remain extrinsic to substance, but is incorporated within it, suggesting a topological asymmetry between container and contained, with the former always in excess of the latter, or the product in excess of its production, from the ground up." Iain Hamilton Grant, "Mining Conditions: A Response to Harman," in *The Speculative Turn*, 44. Grant does not seize this opportunity to think through the usefulness of non-orientable topology.
32. See chapter 2 of my *The Excessive Subject*, "Estimate Causality and the Social Subject of Excess," 30–56.
33. See Alain Badiou, "Towards a New Concept of Existence," *lacanian ink* 29 (2007): 63–72.
34. For a fuller discussion of the formal negation and the empty set, see chapter 2 of my *The Excessive Subject*.
35. The empty set is not only the container of the elements of the set, but also must be included as an element internal to the set as well. So, the empty set is "extimate," as described below.
36. Harman, "Response to Shaviro," 299.
37. Žižek, *Disparities*, 84.
38. Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: Subject Matters," 15.
39. Žižek, *Disparities*, 84.
40. Ibid., 81.
41. Ibid., 84.
42. Sbriglia and Žižek, "Introduction," 16, 10.
43. Ibid., 12.

# Becoming and the Challenge of Ontological Incompleteness: Virginia Woolf *avec* Lacan *contra* Deleuze

Kathryn Van Wert

After the material turn, objects “speak” as the subaltern once could/could not. “New materialists” are increasingly enamored with matter’s purported “unruliness”—as though, in the wake of the subject-canceling effects of constructivism and cultural materialism, agency might be rescued through its displacement onto objects. For many new materialists, the conviction that “stuff has an agenda” fuels utopian hopes that by virtue of its plasticity—whether conceived in quantum or cultural terms—“stuff” might resist commodification and “break down the protocols of capitalist materiality.”<sup>1</sup> In their efforts to theorize the “technoaesthetics” through which matter exerts agency, new materialists tend to locate all matter on a horizontal plane, collapsing distinctions between subject and object into what Adrian Johnston calls a “seamless, undifferentiated Absolute.”<sup>2</sup> Thus we have a proliferation of language waxing ecstatic about what Bruno Latour calls the “quasi-object/quasi-subject.”<sup>3</sup> In this vein, Maurizia Boscagli celebrates matter’s supple “folds and enmeshments,” its “eccentric attractiveness,” and—evoking the erotic promise of the street or club—its “eagerness to mix it up” in “unexpected intimacies and encounters.”<sup>4</sup> Leaving aside the empirical question of how objects are drawn into relation with each other, this discourse highlights new materialism’s libidinal investment in an idea of freedom from totalizing forces that was formerly the domain of identity politics.

Ironically, new materialism tries to evade totalizing forces by introducing another totalizing force: the continuous flux of Becoming, a hallmark of Deleuzian philosophy. This force flattens the ontological field to produce a subject that is substance, just one object “among the various types of object.”<sup>5</sup> Becoming replaces subjective agents with what



Jane Bennett, following Hans Driesch, calls “entelechy”—an “impersonal agency” that “coordinates parts on behalf of a whole . . . without following a rigid plan.”<sup>6</sup> For neovitalists like Bennett, subjectivity is what blocks the monolithic vitality of *le tout*, which renders death, anxiety, and even sexual climax irrelevant in the face of a free-floating desire that is “the limit-expression of *what the human shares with everything it is not*: a bringing out of its *inclusion* in matter.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, here is Deleuze as the champion of *plateaus*, of Becoming as the plenitude of self-sustaining desire: “The slightest caress may be as strong as an orgasm; orgasm is a mere fact, a rather deplorable one, in relation to desire in pursuit of its principle. Everything is allowed: all that counts is for pleasure to be the flow of desire itself, Immanence instead of a measure that interrupts it or delivers it to the three phantoms, namely, internal lack, higher transcendence, and apparent exteriority.”<sup>8</sup> Deleuze accuses the three enemies of flux: psychoanalysis, idealism, and hedonism (masturbation/pleasure as external goal). In a retort to this prohibitive triumvirate’s insistence on lack and discontinuity, Deleuze asserts that “there is, in fact, a joy that is immanent to desire as though desire were filled by itself and its contemplations, a joy that implies no lack or impossibility and is not measured by pleasure since it is what distributes intensities of pleasure and prevents them from being suffused by anxiety, shame, and guilt.”<sup>9</sup> Here, then, is new materialism’s most seductive offer: cancel subjective destitution by replacing the subject with events, assemblages, and multiplicities:

You are longitude and latitude, a set of speeds and slownesses between unformed particles, a set of nonsubjectified affects. You have the individuality of a day, a season, a year, *a life* (regardless of its duration)—a climate, a wind, a fog, a swarm, a pack (regardless of its regularity). Or at least you can have it, you can reach it. . . . Climate, wind, season, hour are not of another nature than the things, animals, or people that populate them, follow them, sleep and awaken within them. This should be read without a pause: the animal-stalks-at-five-o’clock! . . . That is how we need to feel.<sup>10</sup>

*You can have it, you can reach it. That is how we need to feel.* This liberationist, programmatic rhetoric encourages the cultish devotion that Deleuze has acquired in cultural studies, where impersonality manifests increasingly as academic Zen. What neurotic wouldn’t be moved by Rosi Braidotti’s dazzling claim that “death is overrated”? “The ultimate subtraction,” she asserts, “is after all only another phase in a generative process. Too bad that the relentless generative powers of death require the suppression of that which is the nearest and dearest to me, namely myself, my

own vital being-there.”<sup>11</sup> The holy grail for this ethics of impersonality is “a profound love for Life as a cosmic force,” or what Melissa Orlie calls “a joyousness that arises only when we are able to cease holding the self together without at the same time falling apart.”<sup>12</sup> Taken together, these claims are far more than empirical; they seek to establish an ethical paradigm in which “joy” functions as a rejoinder to the transcendental ideal of impossible *jouissance*. For all the complexity of Deleuze’s oeuvre, *A Thousand Plateaus* is easily mobilized in support of the platitude that what stands between us and joy is mere ego: “Where psychoanalysis says, ‘Stop, find yourself again,’ we should say instead, ‘Let’s go further still, . . . we haven’t sufficiently dismantled our self.’”<sup>13</sup>

The appeal of this new materialism depends to no small extent on a culture of self-help that responds to suffering—whether existential or prosaic—with the nostrum: Just let (yourself) go. Open up and be full. If Becoming is now “radical chic,” it is because Deleuze allows us to believe that our investment in plenitude—the metaphysics of presence which our education has never quite put to rest—is not embarrassing, but subversive.<sup>14</sup> Becoming at the “molecular” level begets “molar” rebellions against the father, the state, the priest, and every institution that would block us from our “own vital being-there.”<sup>15</sup> The problem is that we are too comfortable with these enemies; they shield us from a more difficult confrontation with the irreducible alterity that *is* subjectivity. From a Lacanian perspective, “subject” is a crack in reality that is always already inscribed in the “plane of immanence,” a *doublure* that splits “pure” becoming *from itself*.<sup>16</sup> When Hegel instructs us to conceive the Absolute “not only as *Substance*,” as in Spinozist formulations, “but equally as *Subject*,” this is because “subject” is divisibility itself.<sup>17</sup> As a result, any robust new materialism must grapple with the enigma of ontological incompleteness that gives rise to self-reflexivity in the first place, which is to say, the question of how and why being appears to itself. This is what Samo Tomšič calls “the subject *caused* by the autonomy of the system of differences”: “From the position of the self, externalization through speech and labor produces a loss because the translation of the inner in the outer cannot faithfully reproduce the self—precisely because the self does not preexist externalization but is constituted through its reflection in the Other. Because the self is constitutively split, this split assumes the form of incompleteness and loss that necessarily accompanies the metamorphosis of the inner into the outer.”<sup>18</sup> This is the Hegelian paradox of the inner as it twists inside the outer; the Lacanian extimacy (*extimaté*) of the immanent reinscribed into immanence. The wound of subjectivity stems from the fact that the Other cannot be resolved as the Self, producing what is simultaneously a subjective lack and an objective surplus.

Alienation is therefore hardly secondary to subjectivity; rather, as Slavoj Žižek argues, it is the “primordial trauma, the trauma constitutive of the subject, . . . the very gap that bars the subject from *its own* ‘inner life.’”<sup>19</sup> This is why the promise of plenitude *qua* multiplicity is an empty promise: the barred nature of subjectivity guarantees that materiality can never be full. Multiplying absence yields only absence.

Against the new materialist ethics of joy, in which “everything is allowed,” I will argue that ontological incompleteness is the source not just of “anxiety, shame, and guilt,” but indeed of anything approaching “joy.”<sup>20</sup> In particular, I will examine Deleuze’s crucial misreading of one of modernism’s most emblematic literary figures—Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway—as an exemplary figure for Becoming. Not only does Woolf resist the theoretical work that Deleuze would have her do on behalf of Becoming, but a more nuanced reading of Woolf as representative of modernism’s own rigorous engagement with the barred subject can help us understand the ways in which the void of subjectivity is an ineluctable condition of freedom.

### Multiplicity vs. Gap: The Avoidance of Absolute Negativity

First of all, it is easy to see why Deleuze would fall in love with *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the novel’s first ten pages, its heroine, Clarissa Dalloway, articulates her own bravura theory of becoming. Although she is a housewife who does “nothing” in the course of the novel except throw a party, she spends much of her time theorizing about impersonality as she walks through London shopping for her party. As she stands gazing at omnibuses in Piccadilly, we learn through free indirect discourse that “she would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that. She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day.”<sup>21</sup> Moments later, thinking of her old friend Peter, Clarissa declares that “somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but spread ever so far, her life, herself. But

what was she dreaming as she looked into Hatchards' shop window? What was she trying to recover?" (9). On its surface, Clarissa's account of her materiality as an ambiguous mist that is co-substantial with the organic and inorganic contains all the elements of a "machinic" ontology of flux: indeterminacy, multiplicity, intersubjectivity, and what Deleuze calls "indiscernibility." *A Thousand Plateaus* frequently deploys the imaginary conjunction of Clarissa-Woolf as the poster child for "nomadism," as for example in the claim that "the only way to get outside the dualisms is to be-between, to pass between, the intermezzo—that is what Virginia Woolf lived with all her energies, in all of her work, never ceasing to become."<sup>22</sup> After collapsing the distance between Woolf and her creation, Deleuze equates "Virginia Woolf's dream" with his own theory of Becoming:

To reduce oneself to an abstract line, a trait, in order to find one's zone of indiscernibility with other traits, and in this way enter the haecceity and impersonality of the creator. One is then like grass: one has made the world, everybody/everything, into a becoming, because one has made a necessarily communicating world, because one has suppressed in oneself everything that prevents us from slipping between things and growing in the midst of things. One has combined "everything" [*le tout*]: the indefinite article, the infinitive-becoming, and the proper name to which one is reduced. Saturate, eliminate, put everything in.<sup>23</sup>

Deleuze has ventriloquized one of Woolf's own accounts of the type of prose she wanted to write, in which she would "saturate every atom" and "give the moment whole; whatever it includes."<sup>24</sup> She wrote in her diary that she hoped to avoid the "false, unreal, merely conventional" structures of realist narrative and "the damned egotistical self,"<sup>25</sup> and so her heroine does her best to become "like grass" or mist. Clarissa's apparent ability to "slip between things" is fundamental to Deleuze's account of Becoming as that which is "always in the middle. It is not made of points, only of lines. It is a rhizome."<sup>26</sup>

However, this rhizomatic reading of Clarissa is insufficiently attentive to the real poignancy of her character: the fact that despite her efforts to "cease holding herself together without at the same time falling apart,"<sup>27</sup> she cannot cancel her fear of death and remains, essentially, an idealist:

Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say she believed (with all her skepticism), that

since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death . . . perhaps—perhaps. (153)

Here we have Clarissa-Woolf's own reading of her theory of Becoming as *transcendental*, a skeptic's bittersweet fantasy of healing the wound of subjectivity though "odd affinities" with strangers, trees, and barns—what Deleuze might call becoming-barns. Rather than aligning herself with immanence, as Deleuze would have her do, Clarissa's hope of recovering "the unseen" in "this person or that" is a thin defense against her continual confrontation with the absence at the core of her being. Although that absence manifests routinely as a "horror of death," Woolf makes it clear that it is more abstract than organic death: "Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, [Clarissa] went upstairs, paused at the window, came to the bathroom. There was the green linoleum and a tap dripping. There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room" (31). Here, then, is Clarissa's encounter with the Real, the void of subjectivity that precedes any obsession with quasi-objectivity or the "noumenal" life of things. The green linoleum and the leaky faucet are poignant precisely because of their prosaic quality, their lack of vibrancy. Far from becoming-linoleum, Clarissa's encounter with these material objects delivers her directly to the "emptiness about the heart of life."

In Lacanian terms, this is because those objects mediate Clarissa's relationship with *objet a*—the perpetually absent object-cause of desire. The problem is not, as she claims, that she is split between the "part of her which appears" and its "unseen" substance; the problem is that *appearance itself* is divided by the void at its center.<sup>28</sup> If there is a sense in which Clarissa "becomes," it is that she is continually emerging from the abyss of no-thingness at precisely the moments when she makes contact with things ("actualized" phenomena), as in the following domestic scene:

[As] she heard the swish of [her maid] Lucy's skirts, she felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions. The cook whistled in the kitchen. She heard the click of the typewriter. It was her life, and, bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified, saying to herself, as she took the pad with the telephone message on it, how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, she thought (as if some lovely rose had blossomed for her eyes only); not for a moment did she believe in God; but all the

more, she thought, . . . one must pay back from this secret deposit of exquisite moments. (29)

What are “flowers of darkness” if not a figure for the paradox of the virtual-in-actual, where the substantial flower always bears some trace of the void from which it exfoliates? Whereas Deleuze would have Woolf overthrow the extrinsic rule and negative law whereby impossibility is inscribed into desire, Clarissa’s flowers of darkness are a Hegelo-Lacanian figure for the reinscription of exteriority that *is* subjectivity. Tellingly, Clarissa’s apprehension of this negative construct is followed immediately by the discourse markers of thought and perception (“she thought,” “as if”), intimating that even as a narrative effect, subjectivity is the product of negativity’s torsion. That Clarissa feels “like a nun who has left the world” links this moment with the one in which, like a “nun withdrawing,” she confronts the emptiness or “attic room” about the heart of life (31). Notwithstanding the idealism of Clarissa’s theory, Woolf’s essential insight is that Clarissa has not really been “elsewhere” until the sound of swishing skirts produces her sense of *having been* elsewhere, of coming to herself and feeling the familiar “fold round her.”

In other words, Clarissa’s concrete actualization in moments of sublime domesticity is experienced as a continual return from an absolute elsewhere that is not outside “the world” but immanent to it—what Hegel famously calls “the night of the world,” “the interior of [human] nature.”<sup>29</sup> The radical negativity of that “attic room” is always already a feature of Clarissa’s “exquisite moments,” what Woolf in her memoirs refers to as “moments of being.”<sup>30</sup> In Deleuzian terms, it is not the deterritorializing function of intense sensory experience (here, sound) that produces Clarissa’s sense of being “blessed and purified” by the exquisite, but rather the *re*tterritorializing function of the momentary, which is laden with the evanescence of a continual “return” from elsewhere. Far from a “suppression in oneself [of] everything that prevents us from slipping between things and growing in the midst of things,” Clarissa’s exquisite contact with the sensory fabric of her household is the “blooming” of an irrepressible absence (“not for a moment did she believe in God”).<sup>31</sup>

This highlights an essential difference between the place of sequentiality—the ground of the “momentary”—in Deleuze’s ontology and Woolf’s. For Deleuze, Becoming effectively cancels linear temporality: “Becoming is the movement by which the line frees itself from the point, and renders points indiscernible: the rhizome, the opposite of arborescence; break away from arborescence. *Becoming is an antimemory*. . . . Memories always have a reterritorialization function.”<sup>32</sup> Becoming is structurally opposed to arborescence; yet, as we have seen, Clarissa Dalloway’s

life is undoubtedly a tree. As she wanders through London, the bulk of her narrative is reminiscence. On the novel's first page, 57-year-old Clarissa remembers Bourton, her childhood home:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm . . . chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?"—was that it? (3)

In what sense can this memory be said to have a reterritorializing function? Does it render Clarissa more "solid" or less? Essentially, Woolf has introduced her heroine with a sketch of memory *as* absence and interruption. First, Clarissa remembers that "something awful was about to happen"—a threat immanent to her impending "lark" or "plunge" into open air. Next, she remembers the interruption of that "something awful" by the minor annoyance of Peter, who attempts to minimize the moment: "Musing among the vegetables?" Clarissa's memory is thus doubly interrupted: at the outer level by a friend's commentary, and at the inner level by her premonition of danger. In a sense, the fallibility of memory constitutes a third level of interruption, since the memory is cut short in the narrative present by Clarissa's uncertainty about what Peter said—"was that it?" From the start, then, Woolf gives us the recursive structure of memory-as-interruption, a chain of endlessly prior interruptions whose origin is never more substantive than "something awful." Only the certainty of interruption outlasts its "content," and for Woolf memory is a process by which the subject is constituted as \$, primordially barred from its own experience.

This is how Woolf preempts the force of Deleuze's imperative "break away from arborescence": a subject who cannot remember is a subject *par excellence*, the subject of recursive rupture. Becoming as "antimemory" hopes to sidestep the gap in matter that produces sequentiality, making memory possible in the first place. This is because, as Pheng Cheah argues, "the Other is that from which time comes."<sup>33</sup> As a result, "the experience of absolute alterity, however disruptive, must be affirmed because without it, nothing could ever happen. An understanding of materiality in terms of [Marxian] negativity effaces this messianic dimension because, by positing the other as the same, it closes off the experience of radical alterity."<sup>34</sup>

What happens when the subject is closed off from the experience of radical alterity? We enter not the vibrant, “necessarily communicating world” of Deleuze’s misapprehended modernism, but the nightmare of Beckett’s trilogy, where any attempt to close the gap of subjectivity results in what Žižek characterizes as “a gradual reduction of subjectivity to the minimum of a subject without subjectivity—a subject which is no longer a person, . . . a subject of *drive*, which is Freud’s name for immortal persistence, ‘going on.’”<sup>35</sup> Because this subject of immortal persistence lacks a temporal frame, he loses all the productive tension of his being. In a reading of Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing* (1967), Jonathan Boulter emphasizes the vacuous immobility of this minimal subject, a subject which “cannot maintain with any certainty that the experiences he describes are in fact his own; . . . cannot discern if his voice is his own; . . . cannot tell if he has a body; and most crucially, . . . has no sense of personal history, no memory.” As Boulter concludes, “We have, in short, a subject whose ontology denies the viability of mourning and trauma, yet who seems to display the viability of mourning and trauma.”<sup>36</sup> Becoming as antimemory wants a subject unburdened by mourning and trauma, but as Boulter suggests, mourning and trauma (two possible relationships to the past) inaugurate subjectivity. Emptied of relationality, this “subject” would not be any freer than Beckett’s minimal speaker. New materialist evacuations of subjectivity often overlook this paradox of agency: the fact that iterability is the basis of any free decision, yet iterability comes from the disparity in being that prevents self-coincidence. As Hegel says in his preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this disparity is the very “soul” of substance and subject, “that which moves them. That is why some of the ancients conceived the *void* as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the *negative*.”<sup>37</sup>

And that is why Clarissa’s “feeling that it was very, very, dangerous to live even one day” (15) does not, following Deleuze, indicate that she is narrowly, courageously escaping territorialization. The danger is actually in becoming a pure “line of flight,” the logical dead end of the impersonality with which she flirts. It is only the interruptive structure of her life in time that prevents her from plunging into “open air” (or “between things”) and becoming a subject of pure drive, emptied of productive reflexivity. Woolf might well have learned this from Emerson, who reminds us that our attachments to iterative routines make life tolerable: “We fetch fire and water, run about all day among the shops and markets, and get our clothes and shoes made and mended, and are the victims of these details, and once in a fortnight we arrive perhaps at a rational moment. If we were not thus infatuated, if we saw the real from hour to hour, we should not be here to write and to read, but should have been burned or frozen long ago.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, it is Clarissa’s tendency to “run about all day



among the shops and markets,” her susceptibility to bourgeois routine, that allows her to navigate a vertical ontology in which she can hesitate on the threshold of the empty room at the heart of life and reemerge, animated by her encounter with the Real. As she gazes at a neighbor’s house and watches a woman pass behind a sequence of windows, she reflects on “the supreme mystery” of discontinuity, “simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?” (127).

### The Fallacy/Fantasy of Presubjective Plenitude: The Dead End of Absolute Flux

In fact, Deleuze makes no reference to Woolf’s real figure for Becoming, Septimus Smith. Septimus represents all that Clarissa might be if carried to her Deleuzian conclusion: he embodies a need to transcend subjective lack so powerful that he commits suicide by plunging out of a window. Woolf’s diaries, on which Deleuze also draws, indicate that Clarissa was supposed to commit suicide until Woolf assigned that fate to Septimus. He is thus a Becoming-Clarissa, an externalization of a possibility that was always latent in her, namely her fascination with “something awful.” Against Clarissa’s availability to the “moments of being” generated by the void, Septimus insists on “seeing the real from hour to hour,” declining the challenge of ontological incompleteness. He is Woolf’s reduction of the subject to “an abstract line,” her experiment with a flat ontology of immanence in which “everything is allowed.”

A Great War veteran who sits on park benches “seeing and hearing things,” Septimus is almost a parody of the “schizophrenic” openness that Deleuze prescribes as the antidote to neurosis. Contrast Deleuze’s ventriloquism of Woolf—“The thin dog is running in the road, this dog is the road! cries Virginia Woolf”<sup>39</sup>—with Septimus’s description of becoming-dog: “Why could he see through bodies, see into the future, when dogs will become men? It was the heat wave presumably, operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution. Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock” (68). Nor is Septimus’s flux always comedic; at times he seems to be the very spirit-in-image of Becoming: “The earth thrilled beneath him. Red flowers grew through his flesh; their stiff leaves rustled by his head” (68). His narrative also manifests the polyvocality that is an important feature of Deleuzian Becoming; as he sits on a bench in Regent’s Park muttering, he “interpret[s] . . . to mankind” (68) the fluctuating voices of his dead

commanding officer Evans, a Greek chorus of birds, and Prometheus, among others. He is the bearer of absurdly universal messages: “first that trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love” (67).

When doctors ask Septimus for his message, however, he falters: “Love, trees, there is no crime—what was his message?” (98). Like Clarissa’s awful “something,” Septimus’s message is undeliverable because whatever he “hears” when he makes contact with Truth is untranslatable, leaving him in doubt. This is not to discount the preemptive violence that is inherent to the diagnostic process, which might render any message Septimus carries—about war, for instance—inadmissible. But beneath that inadmissibility lurks another more profound: Woolf does not permit Septimus to know *his own* experience. The multiplicity of voices that speak in him mutter incomprehensible platitudes, and finally just words stripped of their grammar (“love, trees,” etc.). Although Septimus is undoubtedly shell-shocked—the consensus of historicist readings—his congenital, primordial wound is simply the wound of subjectivity from which he suffers more acutely than most. That is, the inaccessibility of his experience *precedes* his inability to bridge the gap between himself and those who would do him violence and reify his discourse.

In fact, the drafts of *Mrs. Dalloway* suggest that Woolf envisaged Septimus as burdened by undeliverable messages even as a teenager, long before his experience at war:

There are certain experiences which human beings go through, in complete solitude. {Nobody has any conception what they are.} This young man would feel wake & hear drumming in his ears when he woke a wild sort of clamour; the birds tossing in the air, the peach blossoms trembling, & he caught, cramped. <an> And then a <any> broken milk jug, a greasy thumb mark on the bread plate. But ~~h~~ what does one say?—to one’s father or mother nothing; to one’s sister nothing. And what can one say to oneself?<sup>40</sup>

In another draft of this scene, Septimus awakens to “Heaven knows what confusion of rhapsody, but at breakfast . . . the rhapsody congeals. . . . And so, upstairs, in a little bedroom, or [out of doors], at the office, [life] something unsaid accumulates.”<sup>41</sup> Like the “elsewhere” whence Clarissa is always arriving, this “something unsaid” materializes only as absence—it is retroactively generated by its own loss. And just as Clarissa’s moments of being are inextricable from the darkness of elsewhere, Septimus’s “something unsaid” is imbricated with his rhapsodic response to the natural world, but that “something” ultimately remains untranslatable even as rhapsody. *And what can one say to oneself?* Is this not the endless question

of subjectivity? Whereas Clarissa leaves the question unanswered, yielding to frequent interruptions, Septimus cannot tolerate the “congealing” of rhapsody. As a figure for Becoming, even rhapsody (a musical “line of flight” characterized by mutation and the absence of repeated motifs) is riven with absence, with “certain experiences” that we go through “in complete solitude.” “Nobody,” not even Septimus, “has any conception what they are.” From a Lacanian standpoint, this lost “content” cannot be retrieved by any subject, since its loss *is* subjectivity.

It is thus that historicist readings of Septimus (and perhaps of modernism generally) get the causality wrong: he has not been catapulted out of time by shell-shock; rather, he goes to war hoping to address a melancholic void that has always been with him, that is in fact his origin story.<sup>42</sup> Cheah writes that “despite the scarring, dislocation, and tearing that it inflicts on presence, materiality in the deconstructive sense has a rigorously affirmative and generative character.”<sup>43</sup> Woolf allows us to extend this insight by claiming that a materialism attentive to the lack constitutive of matter is affirmative *precisely because* it scars, dislocates, and tears the experience of present being. Finally, then, while we might be tempted to say that Septimus is scarred by his experience at war, it would be better to say that he is not scarred enough. He is schizophrenically identified with multiplicity to the point of existing outside of time, so close to the world that he is really “elsewhere.”

Because of their divergent relationships to lack, Clarissa and Septimus also differ in their relationships to “mundane” objects: Clarissa’s tentative reconciliation with absence draws her into intense relations with skirts, typewriters, and gloves, while Septimus cannot feel anything but disgust and alienation on seeing a broken milk jug or fingerprint, as there is really no object for him but *objet a*, which even suicide cannot deliver to him. In a moving scene that precedes his suicide, Septimus’s wife, a hatmaker, intuitively that she might save his life by coaxing him into some small infatuation with the details of a hat she is making for Mrs. Peters:

[Septimus] shaded his eyes so that he might see only a little of her face at a time . . . in case it were deformed. . . . But no, there she was, perfectly natural, sewing, with the pursed lips that women have. . . . Why then rage and prophesy? Why fly scourged and outcast? Why be made to tremble and sob by the clouds? Why seek truths and deliver messages when Rezia sat sticking pins into the front of her dress, and Mrs. Peters was in Hull? Miracles, revelations, agonies, loneliness, falling through the sea down, down into the flames, all were burnt out, for he had a sense, as he watched Rezia trimming the straw hat for Mrs. Peters, of a coverlet of flowers. (142–43)

Following this revelation, Septimus actually helps his wife to trim her hat and jokes with her. For a moment, he seems to acknowledge that although he is not identical with his speech or labor, those products of the Hegelian “organs of action” that materialize the inner in the outer, nevertheless, as Stanley Cavell writes, “[his] body, and the body of [his] expressions, [are his], [him] on earth, all there ever will *be* of [him].”<sup>44</sup> Before long, though, he is overcome by panic and disgust. Again he becomes the bearer of messages that no one will understand, signaling his refusal to reconcile himself with subjective destitution. Rather than face subjectivity *as* undeliverable message, he throws himself from a window into the Real, the impossible yet ineluctable pre-subjective, never to return. As such, he is unassimilable to Woolf’s “dream,” “what [she] lived with all her energies”; this is perhaps why he makes no appearance in *A Thousand Plateaus*.<sup>45</sup>

Rather, in his most consequential misreading of Woolf, Deleuze sees Clarissa as a figure of liberating multiplicity. She is the exemplary pack animal or werewolf (with a double entendre on wolf/Woolf), a liminal figure who is both of and not of the pack: “To be fully a part of the crowd and at the same time completely outside it, removed from it: to be on the edge, to take a walk like Virginia Woolf (never again will I say, ‘*I am this, I am that*’).” Although Becoming transgresses temporal sequentiality, it is nonetheless a matter of spatiality, of “the position of the subject itself in relation to the pack or wolf-multiplicity.”<sup>46</sup> One becomes in relation to a type that is itself always in flux, such that becoming is not “a question of comparison at all,” which would imply a degree of stability and telos, but rather of “the relation of the proper name as an *intensity* to the multiplicity it instantaneously apprehends.”<sup>47</sup> Deleuze contrasts this anti-Oedipal Becoming with the Freudian unconscious: “Freud tried to approach crowd phenomena from the point of view of the unconscious, but he did not see clearly, he did not see that the unconscious itself was fundamentally a crowd.”<sup>48</sup>

Conspicuously, Deleuze does not mention Woolf’s most obvious figuration of the “pack” to which Clarissa does and does not belong: the party she assembles. This party, which is the novel’s main event, is also the ultimate figure for the gap that scars immanence, even the immanence of “the crowd.” Although Clarissa’s friends are lapsed radicals who call her “the perfect hostess” to hurt her feelings, Clarissa sees her parties as “an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom? An offering for the sake of offering, perhaps” (122). The price a hostess must pay for this gift, however, is alienation: “Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way” (170–71). As Clarissa hesitates on the threshold of her party, a hostess who

is central to the gathering and yet absent, “something not herself,” she does indeed represent a certain tangential intensity with relation to the crowd. But the most glaring fact about the party is that Septimus commits suicide while it is unfolding, a suicide that becomes the subject of gossip among Clarissa’s guests. Although Septimus dies elsewhere, Clarissa perceives his death as a tear in the fabric of her masterpiece: “Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here’s death, she thought” (183). Note the chiasmic structure of this revelation, in which absence (death) is bookended by the discourse markers of thought (“thought Clarissa,” “she thought”), again intimating the metaphysical structure of subjectivity as the edge(s) of absence. If the assembled crowd represents the novel’s unconscious, a space of virtuality in which the aleatory collision of elements and intensities produces “unexpected intimacies” and “encounters,” then Septimus’s suicide marks a rupture in this process, an absolute limit to its “deterritorializing” function. It “speaks” through Clarissa, who reflects:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This [Septimus] had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death.

But this young man who had killed himself—had he plunged holding his treasure? (184)

From a Hegelo-Lacanian perspective, Septimus has indeed plunged holding his treasure: the subjective agency that allowed him to choose death in the first place. His death is “an attempt to communicate” (*contra* Deleuze’s “necessarily communicating world”) by closing the gap that subject opens in substance, by launching himself into the “sheer” objectivity of death. Of course, death is not “the thing . . . that mattered,” the “thing wreathed about with chatter”; suicide is just an attempt to reach the Thing, *das Ding*. Septimus believes that in killing himself he can close the loop of subjectivity and thereby possess the in-itself. He has no opportunity to learn that transcendence is a fantasy produced by the endlessly prior gap in immanence, a projection of subjective lack into “the world.” Septimus will never be any closer to Being than in the moments when he feels his non-being.

As Clarissa’s double, Septimus allows her a little vicarious death, such that “she felt somehow very much like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away”

(186). His act affirms her agency *and* the impossibility of reaching the “thing that mattered.” As the symbolic reinscription of an absolute rupture into the flux of her party, Septimus’s suicide makes Clarissa “feel the beauty, feel the fun” (186), an energy she carries back into the thick of things, the “chatter” of her life as a pack animal. In fact, the knowledge of absence that Clarissa bears with her is what makes her such a “perfect hostess,” since it excites her guests without their knowing why. As her friend Peter says when she appears in the doorway: “What is this terror? What is this ecstasy? . . . What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement? It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was” (194). The intensity of Clarissa as she returns from her confrontation with death is not the instantaneous apprehension of multiplicity, but of lack, not the “power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel,” but the power of absolute negativity as it flickers in the mundane realm of selves.<sup>49</sup> Even the grammar of the novel’s famous last sentence (“For there she was”) supports this claim: “there” marks a definite presence, her sudden appearance in the room of her party, but “was” marks the eternal displacement of presence in its fluidity, the miracle of sequentiality. For Deleuze, “if the unconscious knows nothing of negation it is because there is nothing negative in the unconscious, only indefinite moves toward and away from zero, which does not at all express lack but rather the positivity of the full body as support and prop.”<sup>50</sup> But at the center of Woolf’s own vision of vibrant multiplicity is a double absence—the death of another, elsewhere, in an act of sheer negation. And this man who “plunges holding his treasure” is very much the life of the party.

### (Be)coming and Going: Climax and the Void

With this in mind, let us reconsider the second-class status of pleasure in a new materialism that professes a desire which lacks nothing. Against Deleuze’s account of climax as the poor shadow of plateau, I suggest that where orgasm is concerned we *can* plunge holding our treasure: we can put “coming” back into Becoming. Here is Clarissa’s own rather Victorian description of climax as the rapturous pressure of absence:

It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which

split the skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for a moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over—the moment. (32)

Clearly, Clarissa experiences climax not as completion but as momentary contact with the void. Whereas her “inner meaning [is] almost expressed,” Septimus refuses incompleteness, insisting that “he knew everything. He knew the meaning of the world” (65). It is thus not Clarissa who signifies perpetual plateau, but Septimus, whose Becoming prevents him from ever *coming*, and for whom there are no *petits morts*, only big Death. Perhaps Clarissa allows us a new way of seeing what is behind Deleuze’s dismissal of climax: the fact that it is just another approach to the abyss—not fullness, but the *impossibility* of fullness. As Lacan argues, the “sexual colouring” of the libido is ultimately “the colour of emptiness, suspended in the light of a gap.”<sup>51</sup> Perhaps that is what really makes orgasm “a rather deplorable” fact.<sup>52</sup> Consider, instead, what David Shields says about orgasm: “The look in the eyes when a person comes is that place between life and death. A long, momentary surrender to the soul-trapping ghost—taking the person away, sucking them into a pleasure vacuum, echoing crows cawing. In Spanish they say, *Me voy, me voy*. ‘I’m going, I’m going.’ Which seems more accurate than ‘I’m coming, I’m coming.’ No you’re not. You’re leaving.”<sup>53</sup> The place between life and death is also the subject, and its “leaving” is simply a figure for drive, that which moves us asymptotically toward originary loss. In response to new materialism’s celebrations of the positive flux of desire that cancels negativity and generates multiplicity, Lacan’s Woolf reminds us that multiplicity flowers around the very absence it wants to contravene. In the richly concrete realm of novels and personalities where we live, there is no hallucinogenic walk among the omnibuses, no rhapsodic response to birdsong or ecstatic intimacy at a dinner party that does not carry the savor of absolute negativity.

## Notes

1. Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 13.

2. Adrian Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 13.

3. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

4. Boscagli, *Stuff Theory*, 13.
5. Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities, 2011), 20.
6. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), 55.
7. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 128.
8. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 156–57.
9. *Ibid.*, 155.
10. *Ibid.*, 262.
11. Rosi Braidotti, “The Politics of ‘Life Itself’ and New Ways of Dying,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 212.
12. *Ibid.*, 212; Melissa Orlie, “Impersonal Matter,” in *New Materialisms*, 126.
13. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 151.
14. Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 41. Despite his later assessment (in *Absolute Recoil*) of Deleuze’s “outright psychotic foreclosure” of Hegelian thought, Žižek, in *Organs without Bodies*, resurrects a Deleuze who is uncannily Hegelian. Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2014), 33.
15. For Deleuze’s discussion of the relationship between molecular and molar politics, see *A Thousand Plateaus*, 34–35 and 115.
16. This is the Lacanian “barred” subject (\$), which emerges from its own loss.
17. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10.
18. Samo Tomšič, “Materialism between Critique and Speculation,” in *Repeating Žižek*, ed. Agon Hamza (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015), 69.
19. Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 222.
20. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 156, 155.
21. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Harcourt, 1925), 8; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
22. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 277.
23. *Ibid.*, 280.
24. Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), 136.
25. *Ibid.*, 136, 32.
26. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 262–63.
27. Orlie, “Impersonal Matter,” 126.
28. In her memoirs, Woolf admits to her own recurrent sense of “a token of some real thing behind appearances.” Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985), 17.
29. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit: A Translation of the Jena Lec-*



*tures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805–6)*, trans. Leo Rauch (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 87.

30. Woolf, *Moments of Being*.

31. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 280

32. *Ibid.*, 294.

33. Pheng Cheah, “Non-Dialectical Materialism,” in *New Materialisms*, 78.

34. *Ibid.*, 80.

35. Žižek, *Disparities*, 220–21.

36. Jonathan Boulter, “Does Mourning Require a Subject? Samuel Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 2 (2004): 337.

37. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 21.

38. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nominalist and Realist,” in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 581.

39. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 259.

40. Virginia Woolf, *The Hours: The British Museum Manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway*, ed. Helen M. Wussow (New York: Pace University Press, 1997), 103. Wussow has replaced Woolf’s square brackets with braces. Woolf’s cancellations are marked by strikethrough; her insertions are marked by angle brackets.

41. *Ibid.*, 104.

42. For an extended version of this argument, see Kathryn Van Wert, “The Early Life of Septimus Smith,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 36, no. 1 (2012): 71–89.

43. Cheah, “Non-Dialectical Materialism,” 78.

44. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 383.

45. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 280, 277.

46. *Ibid.*, 29.

47. *Ibid.*, 27, 28.

48. *Ibid.*, 29.

49. *Ibid.*, 240.

50. *Ibid.*, 31.

51. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2007), 722.

52. Or, as Žižek asks, “What if this gap in the immanence (which is not caused by any transcendence but is itself its own cause) is what Deleuze cannot accept?” *Organs without Bodies*, 54.

53. David Shields and Samantha Matthews, *That Thing You Do with Your Mouth* (New York: McSweeney’s, 2015), 97.

# From Sublimity to Sublimation: Hegel, Lacan, Melville

Russell Sbriglia

The sublime has been the focus of a number of analyses of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* to date. Though varied in their approach—some of them, like Barbara Glenn's, attend to the vestiges of the Burkean sublime throughout the novel, while others, like Bryan Wolf's, attend to the novel's resonances with the Kantian sublime—what unites virtually all of them is their primary focus on the novel's garrulous first-person narrator, Ishmael—and with good reason.<sup>1</sup> In one of the novel's most pivotal chapters, "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael enumerates the various attributes of whiteness that render it a harbinger of the sublime, among them its "spectralness," its "indefiniteness," and its "visible absence of color."<sup>2</sup> Adopting the perspective of the "sunken-eyed young Platonist" (139) sketched in another pivotal chapter, "The Mast-Head," Ishmael here proposes that perhaps whiteness is sublime because it triggers "the instinct of the knowledge of the demonism in the world," the knowledge that "all other earthly hues . . . are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like a harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within" (169–70).

Critics have long been keen on pointing out the instances throughout the novel in which Ishmael's voice seems to drop out of the narrative, typical examples of which include chapters such as "Sunset," "Dusk," "First Night-Watch," and, most notably, "Midnight, Forecastle." Yet it is here in "The Whiteness of the Whale," that seemingly most Ishmaelian of chapters, that Ishmael's voice is most markedly displaced by one more akin to that of the "one Captain that is lord over the Pequod" (394): Captain Ahab. Coming on the heels of Ahab's mesmerizing speech on the quarterdeck—a speech that ends with Ishmael joining the rest of the crew in pledging allegiance to the "fiery hunt" (170) and swearing "Death to Moby Dick!" (146)—Ishmael's ruminations as to what Moby Dick meant to him ultimately sound less his own than Ahab's. Indeed,

it is as if the “wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling” that overcomes him while listening to Ahab, thereby leading Ahab’s “quenchless feud” (155) to seem his own, here extends to his worldview as well. For in this instance, the character who for a majority of readers has represented good as opposed to evil, love as opposed to hate, Eros as opposed to Thanatos, channels the opposite: not only does Ishmael here acknowledge the “demonism in the world,” adding that “though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright”; he also theorizes that whiteness, in “shadow[ing] forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe,” “stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation” (169).<sup>3</sup> Demonism, shadows, stabbing: this is the language of the novel’s true philosopher of the sublime, Ahab.

Focusing on Ahab, in this chapter I will examine the ways in which Melville’s monomaniacal captain’s quest for the White Whale not only shares far more in common with the Hegelian sublime than the Burkean or Kantian sublimes—the first of which, to my knowledge, has yet to be discussed with regard to Melville’s novel—but also anticipates the Lacanian theory of sublimation. My approach will be speculative as opposed to historicist, for my aim is not to prove that Melville had read Hegel and that Lacan, in turn, had read Melville, but rather to show how the novel offers us a means of bridging—of suturing, as it were—the gap between Hegelian sublimity and Lacanian sublimation.<sup>4</sup> In taking such an approach, I will be using *Moby-Dick* in an exemplificatory fashion—exemplificatory not in the sense of merely illustrating Hegel’s and Lacan’s respective philosophical and psychoanalytic concepts, but in the sense of providing an exemplary instance of the way(s) in which literature serves to mediate—that is, to function as a mediator between—the discourses of philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Such a “short-circuit” approach to *Moby-Dick*—an approach paradigmatic of the Ljubljana School—challenges not only the long-regnant cultural materialist assumption that American romanticism is inherently anti-materialist/realist, but also the currently ascendant new materialist/realist assumption that materialism no longer needs the subject—indeed, that a continued focus on subjectivity is an obstacle to proper materialist thinking. With regard to the former, as I will demonstrate, contrary to virtually all transcendentalist thinking from Plato to Kant, Melville, via his staging of Ahab’s wrestling with the rhetorics and registers of sublimity and sublimation, posits that the ideal is born out of, and is thus immanent to, the material as opposed to vice versa, the result being what Adrian Johnston would term a “transcendental materialist” ontology.<sup>5</sup> With regard to the latter, such a transcendental materialism, I hope to show, goes a long way toward demonstrating the necessity of retaining the category

of the subject (and a robust theory of subjectivity more generally) for contemporary and future materialist thought alike.

### "The Little Lower Layer": Kant, Hegel, and the Anti-Symbolic Sublime

Let me begin by briefly rehearsing the scene that gives way to Ishmael's aforementioned Ahabian meditations on the sublime. Having kept mostly to his cabin during the first weeks of the *Pequod's* voyage and not yet having presented himself to the crew at large, Ahab one evening suddenly calls all hands to the quarterdeck to inform them of the true purpose of their venture—to hunt not for oil, but for the legendary White Whale, Moby Dick, the whale that, on a previous voyage, "dismasted" him by biting off his leg. Promising to chase Moby Dick "round perdition's flames" before giving him up, Ahab informs the crew that "this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out." When, in response to this proclamation, Starbuck, the *Pequod's* first mate and the novel's primary representative of the marriage between Protestantism and capitalism, protests that he shipped "to hunt whales" for the "Nantucket market," not to pursue his "commander's vengeance" (143), adding that to seek vengeance upon a "dumb thing" that "simply smote thee from blindest instinct" seems "blasphemous," Ahab raises the stakes of the hunt for Moby Dick by giving Starbuck the following primer in transcendentalism:

Hark ye . . . the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principle, I will wreak my hate upon him. (144)

In what remains the most influential—and magisterial—reading of the novel of the past thirty years, Donald Pease interprets this speech of

Ahab's as the crux of a "scene of cultural persuasion" in which Ahab, "in a series of stunning rhetorical maneuvers," "coopt[s] the terms able to justify Starbuck's potential mutiny."<sup>6</sup> As Pease convincingly argues, by "elevat[ing] Starbuck's dissent into an apocalyptic plane where dissent and Ahab's wish for a final reckoning with the powers of the universe become indistinguishable from one another," Ahab not only disqualifies himself as "a target for Starbuck's dissent," but, in so doing, also "virtually eliminates any genuine motive for Starbuck to embody."<sup>7</sup> Yet, convincing as Pease's ideological interpretation of this pivotal speech may be (and it could indeed be said to represent the high-water mark of new historicist readings of the novel), Ahab's rhetoric of "the little lower layer" ultimately renders his speech more the crux of a scene of *philosophical* persuasion than of cultural persuasion, one whose true victim of co-optation is less Starbuck than Kant.

As noted at the outset, the vast majority of analyses of the sublime in *Moby-Dick* focus almost exclusively on Ishmael. Yet there are a few exceptions to this rule, the most notable being those by John Becker and Nancy Fredericks, both of whom examine this pivotal speech of Ahab's. Becker, for instance, notes that Ahab in this passage "speaks of Moby Dick in a manner that suggests Kant's conception of the sublime," according to which the sublime "constitutes a link between what Kant called the phenomenal (the empirical world of sense impressions) and the noumenal (the world of undifferentiated things-in-themselves)."<sup>8</sup> Becker is correct, for like Kant, who deems all phenomenal objects to be "mere appearances" of noumenal ones, Ahab deems all visible objects to be mere pasteboard masks. Moby Dick in particular is the sensible, "unreasoning mask" of some "unknown" and "inscrutable" yet "still reasoning thing."<sup>9</sup> What Becker fails to note, however, is that Ahab's speech is at the same time utterly *un-Kantian*, for whereas Kant repeatedly insists upon the impossibility of ever knowing or experiencing things-in-themselves, "ungodly, god-like" (76) Ahab insists on his ability to penetrate the wall separating the noumenal from the phenomenal and thereby gain access to things-in-themselves.<sup>10</sup> In so believing, he is, as Fredericks argues, a prime example of what Kant would term a "fanatic."

As defined in the *Critique of Judgment*, "fanaticism" (*Schwärmerei*) is "a belief in our capacity of seeing something beyond all bounds of sensibility," a "going mad with reason" that Kant, conveniently for philosophical readings of *Moby-Dick*, characterizes as "comparable to *monomania*," a term that Melville uses to characterize Ahab's obsession with Moby Dick no fewer than fifteen times over the course of the novel.<sup>11</sup> As a form of "pious brazenness . . . occasioned by a certain pride and an altogether too great confidence in oneself to come closer to the heavenly natures and

to elevate itself by an astonishing flight above the usual and prescribed order," fanaticism deludes those afflicted by it into believing that they have access to the suprasensible realm, to the noumenal—that they are capable of "an immediate and extraordinary communion with a higher nature," a "supernatural communi[on]." <sup>12</sup> Given how applicable this definition is to Ahab—indeed, it could double as a portrait of him—it is little wonder that Fredericks, in one of the better philosophical readings of the novel, labels him a fanatic. As she asserts, Ahab "do[es] not acknowledge the limits to [his] powers of representation," insisting instead on his ability to receive a "positive presentation" of the noumenal, to see what lies "beyond all bounds of sensibility" and thus "beyond representation in any positive sense." <sup>13</sup> Indeed, as Fredericks sees it, Ahab's entire quest can be characterized as less an attempt to exact revenge upon Moby Dick than to "collapse . . . the distinction between phenomena and noumena." <sup>14</sup> Like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, whose crossing of the equatorial line into the "cold Country towards the South pole" Stanley Cavell interprets as a crossing into the realm of things-in-themselves (hence the "strange things that befall" the Mariner and his crew in this region), Ahab, Fredericks argues, "crosses the line that Ishmael refuses to cross," "the line that marks the realm of the transcendent and that separates . . . empirical phenomena from the ideas of reason." <sup>15</sup> She thus concludes that it is not Ahab but Ishmael who is the novel's true "artist of the sublime," for contrary to Ahab's Moby Dick, Ishmael's is "unable to be appropriated in any sense but negatively." <sup>16</sup>

To answer whether or not Ahab's transcendentalism is truly a fanatical attempt to traverse the gap separating phenomena from noumena, to dispense with any mediator between the two, however, requires turning to the Hegelian critique of the Kantian sublime, one that, like Hegel's critique of Kantian morality, is not anti-Kantian but, on the contrary, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, "more Kantian than Kant himself." <sup>17</sup> As Žižek explains, contrary to the typical understanding of the dialectic, Hegel actually follows Kant in refusing to affirm "the possibility of some kind of 'reconciliation'-mediation between Idea and phenomena, the possibility of surmounting the gap which separates them, of abolishing the radical 'otherness,' the radical negative relationship of the Idea-Thing to phenomena." <sup>18</sup> Rather than sublating the gap between Idea and phenomena, Hegel, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, holds that the very "basis of the sublime" is the "separation between meaning [the absolute Idea] and external reality," "the foreignness of the Idea to natural phenomena," "the incompatibility of the two sides to one another." <sup>19</sup> Like Kant, who in the *Critique of Judgment* maintains that the experience of the sublime is altogether "negative in respect of what is sensible," Hegel maintains that

“the relation of the Idea to the objective world . . . [is] a *negative one*”: “what alone has the look of the sublime is the abstract universal [the absolute Idea] which never coincides with itself in anything determinate; on the contrary, its attitude to the particular in general, and therefore to every embodiment also, is *purely negative*.”<sup>20</sup> Hence Žižek’s insistence that Hegel’s critique of the Kantian sublime lies not in “pretend[ing] to mediate the Idea with phenomena” by way of a reconciliation between the two that synthesizes or sublates them, but rather in taking Kant’s notion of the sublime “more *literally* than Kant himself.”<sup>21</sup> Whereas Kant “determine[s] the Thing as a transcendent surplus beyond what can be represented,” as “something positively given beyond the field of representation, of phenomenality,” for Hegel “there is *nothing* beyond phenomenality, beyond the field of representation. The experience of radical negativity, of the radical inadequacy of all phenomena to the Idea, the experience of the radical fissure between the two . . . is already *Idea itself as ‘pure,’ radical negativity*.”<sup>22</sup> When we encounter the type of negative presentation of the Thing-in-itself described by Kant, we are already in the midst of the Idea, for the Idea is nothing but the radical inadequacy of all material phenomena to represent it. In short, the Idea is sheer negativity. As Hegel himself explains in his brief engagement with the *Critique of Judgment* in the *Aesthetics*, his position differs from Kant’s insofar as he holds the Idea to be “grounded in the one absolute substance *qua* the content which is to be represented”: “substance is raised above the single phenomenon in which it is to acquire representation, although *it can be expressed only in relation to the phenomenal in general*, because as substance and essentiality *it is in itself without shape*.”<sup>23</sup> What this means is that the Idea, the Thing-in-itself, has no positive existence beyond its appearance *qua* phenomena, and this negative ontology of the Idea, its immanence to the experience of the sublime within the phenomenal realm—what Žižek characterizes as “the negative self-relationship of the representation”—is precisely what the sublime underscores.<sup>24</sup> To again quote Hegel: “in sublimity, the proper content, i.e. the universal substance of all things [the Idea], could not become explicitly visualized *without being related to created existence*, even if that created existence were inadequate to its own essence,” for though “foreign . . . to natural phenomena,” the Idea “has no other reality to express it,” and thus “seeks itself in” natural phenomena.<sup>25</sup>

This is why the typical interpretation of Hegelian dialectics as a reconciliation between noumena and phenomena that sublates the abyss separating the two is incorrect. There is no *Aufhebung* here because, as Paul de Man points out, “there is nothing . . . to lift up or to uplift.”<sup>26</sup> For Hegel, to again draw upon Žižek’s precise analysis, “we overcome phenomenality not by reaching beyond it, but by the experience of how

there is nothing beyond it—how its beyond is precisely this Nothing of absolute negativity, of the utmost inadequacy of the appearance to its notion. The suprasensible essence is the ‘appearance *qua* appearance’—that is, it is not enough to say that the appearance is never adequate to its essence, we must also add that *this ‘essence’ itself is nothing but the inadequacy of the appearance to itself*, to its notion.”<sup>27</sup> This final addition is the further turn of the transcendental screw effected by Hegel, a turn that renders his theory of the sublime a complement to the theory of “infinite judgment” outlined in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the most iconic instance of which is the claim that “the *being of Spirit is a bone*,” that “externality is the outer and immediate reality of Spirit, not as an organ, and not as a language or a sign, but as a *dead Thing*.”<sup>28</sup> Hence de Man’s assertion that “nothing sounds less sublime, in our current use of the term, than the sublime in Hegel.”<sup>29</sup>

By thus positing the noumenal as immanent to the phenomenal, the sublime loses the symbolic character it has in Kant, which is why the title of Hegel’s chapter on the sublime in the *Aesthetics*, “The Symbolism of the Sublime,” is somewhat misleading. As Hegel explains, contrary to symbolism, according to which “meaning and shape,” Idea and phenomena, are “external to one another” (for “externality is present *implicitly* in symbolism”), in sublimity “the relation of meaning and shape is . . . of . . . a[n] essential and necessary kind.”<sup>30</sup> This is yet another way of articulating the Idea’s immanence, its internality, so to speak, to the field of representation itself. For Hegel, the sublime object is not merely a *symbol* of the Idea-Thing; rather, it *is* the Idea-Thing. This, ultimately, is what is most radical about the Hegelian sublime, especially when contrasted with both the Burkean and Kantian sublimes: it conceives of the relationship between phenomena and noumena horizontally rather than vertically.

To thus return to *Moby-Dick*, by locating the Idea on a “little *lower* layer”—an instance, if ever there was one, of what Kenneth Burke calls “transcendence downwards”—Ahab, it would seem, fails to comprehend this immanent, horizontal relationship between noumena and phenomena.<sup>31</sup> Such being the case, he likewise seems to fail to comprehend the Idea as the Nothing of absolute negativity. But does he really?

As John Bryant points out in what remains one of the most perspicacious philosophical readings of the novel, in the midst of his rejoinder to Starbuck on the quarterdeck, Ahab “lets slip his most fundamental anxiety, that there is no ideality at all,” confessing, “Sometimes I think there is naught beyond. But ’tis enough.” Bryant maintains (correctly, I think) that this slip reveals that Ahab’s transcendental rhetoric is “really a coverup for his pathological fear of nothingness,” a “resort from . . . nihilism,” from his “unconscious fear of non-existence.”<sup>32</sup> Bryant



further this argument by reading the concluding line of the soliloquy that Ahab delivers immediately following the quarterdeck scene (in chapter 37, "Sunset")—"Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!" (147)—not positively but negatively: "'Naught' (i.e., the problem of ontological nothingness) is an 'obstacle' for Ahab. The complex Shakespearean pun allows Ahab's outward defiance (Nothing can get in my way) to become an unexpected admission of his fear of nihility (Nothingness gets in my way). The perfect line of Ahab's 'iron way' is tied up in a naught."<sup>33</sup> Like his earlier slip ("Sometimes I think there's naught beyond"), this Elizabethan pun on "Naught's an obstacle" suggests that on some level—or layer—Ahab knows very well that there's naught beyond the phenomenal but nonetheless uses transcendentalism as a means of disowning or disavowing this knowledge.<sup>34</sup> Hence Bryant's conclusion that Ahab is a "transcendental trickster" who engages in a "manipulative misuse of transcendentalism."<sup>35</sup>

Given this keen diagnosis of Ahab's pathological fear of nothingness, of "nihility," it is somewhat puzzling that what Bryant ultimately finds most "base" about the brand of transcendentalism that Ahab peddles in his quarterdeck speech is not its ontology, which, as Bryant (like Becker) points out, "assumes the transcendental distinction between natural and spiritual facts, base actuality and sublime ideal, . . . practical understanding and Reason," but its aesthetics and ethics.<sup>36</sup> Contrary to Bryant, what I want to claim is that it is the other way around, that Ahab's transcendentalism is base not because of its aesthetics or ethics, but because of its ontology, for Ahab *does*, in fact, apprehend the Idea-Thing as pure nothingness but recoils from such an apprehension. The great irony of Ahab's situation is that, faced with the specter of nihilism, with the nothingness of the "beyond," he turns to transcendentalism. That is to say, Ahab's transcendentalism, his insistence on striking through the mask, is itself an act of masking, an act of disowning or disavowing his knowledge of the nothingness of being. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Ahab does not aim to thrust through the wall and grasp what Ishmael, in an oft-quoted phrase, characterizes as "the ungraspable phantom of life" (14); on the contrary, unable to abide that the Idea-Thing is "the pure Nothing of absolute negativity," Ahab erects a wall (in the form of Moby Dick) to shield himself from it.<sup>37</sup> We should thus say that Ahab's most fundamental anxiety is not that there is no ideality at all, but that the ontology of the ideal is nothing more than the radical negativity with which we are confronted in the material realm by way of the experience of the sublime. Such being the case, his transcendentalism is not, as Fredericks maintains, a fanatical attempt to attain absolute knowledge by way of transcending the gap between phenomena and nou-

mena. Nor is it, to invoke readings by those more sympathetic to Ahab's quest, the vehicle of a Promethean hubris that bestows upon him a tragic heroism.<sup>38</sup> While Ahab's transcendentalism is indeed tragic, the tragedy, to invoke Cavell's magisterial reading of *King Lear*, the Shakespeare play that *Moby-Dick* most takes after, lay in Ahab's "avoidance" of his knowledge of the negative ontology of the transcendent.<sup>39</sup>

### Subject as Object: Lacan and the Extimacy of Sublimation

In order to better understand how Ahab turns Moby Dick into a barrier that shields him from the nothingness of the Ideal requires moving from the philosophical logic of the sublime to the psychoanalytic logic of sublimation. As Lacan defines it in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, sublimation is the process whereby an object is "elevated to the dignity of the Thing."<sup>40</sup> Sublimation occurs by way of what Lacan, adopting a term from art history, calls "anamorphosis," a type of "looking awry" at an object, as Žižek, adopting a line from *Richard II*, puts it, that causes one to see in the object something that cannot be seen by looking at it straightforwardly, by "gazing rightly" at it (to again invoke *Richard II*).<sup>41</sup> As Sara Murphy succinctly defines it, anamorphosis is "the name of a form of 'optics' (which later came to be called perspective) that is used to create an image of an object that appears in its correct proportions only by looking at it from an off-center angle."<sup>42</sup> For Lacan, anamorphosis is a product of the subject's desire; hence his definition of the sublime object—the "Thing" generated by the process of sublimation—as the "object-cause of desire," what he came to term *objet petit a*. As Lacan elaborates throughout his later seminars, the *objet petit a* does not exist objectively but is, by definition, the result of a subjective distortion, of a gaze distorted by desire. That is to say, the *objet petit a* is a "nothing" that becomes a "something" only when looked at from a standpoint slanted by the subject's desires, fears, and anxieties—a slanted standpoint that endows the subject with a gaze capable of seeing nothingness, of seeing an object "begot by nothing" (to invoke yet another line from *Richard II*).<sup>43</sup>

As suggested above, the true Shakespearean model for Ahab isn't Richard II but King Lear.<sup>44</sup> Yet Ahab's sublimation of Moby Dick challenges the wisdom proffered by Lear—that "Nothing will come of nothing"—for the *objet petit a* is precisely something come of nothing. This is why, contrary to Starbuck, who sees nothing (or, more precisely, no *Thing*) in Moby Dick and thus dismisses him as a "dumb thing," Ahab

sees in him an “inscrutable thing,” a Thing whose generation Ishmael explains at length in a passage from chapter 41, “Moby Dick”—the chapter, fittingly enough, in which Ishmael first addresses Ahab’s monomaniacal obsession with the White Whale:

Ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning . . . Ahab did not fall down and worship . . . but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. (160)

In his “frantic morbidness” and “wild vindictiveness,” Ahab elevates Moby Dick to the dignity of the Thing, “deliriously transfer[ing] the idea” of an “intangible malignity”—an evil reason—onto him, thus “visibly personif[ying]” it and making it “practically assailable.” To return to the pivotal line from the conclusion of “Sunset”—“Naught’s an obstacle, naught’s an angle to the iron way!”—we should place just as much emphasis on the second clause as the first, for “naught,” ontological nothingness, is for Ahab that which provides him with the angle necessary for seeing Moby Dick’s evil reason, for anamorphically generating the *objet petit a*, the pursuit of which leads him on—or, better, down—the iron way. This explains why Ahab, in his quarterdeck speech, doesn’t simply say that Moby Dick “has outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it”; rather, he says, “*I see in him* outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it.”<sup>45</sup>

What this process of sublimation calls attention to is the immanent genesis of the transcendent, the ideal’s genesis out of the material (as opposed to the typical vice versa). And this is where sublimity and sublimation finally meet. To return to Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, Hegel explains that “in the sublime . . . the loftiest content [the Idea] is always introduced into things, phenomena, incidents, and deeds which . . . are incapable either of actually having the might of such a content in themselves or of express-

ing it.”<sup>46</sup> The result of this attempt to “elevate” natural phenomena to the Idea is that it “does violence to them,” “distort[ing] and stretch[ing] them unnaturally,” thereby rendering them “incompatible” with their everyday meaning, “which is raised above all mundane content.”<sup>47</sup> Distorting and stretching, raising and elevating objects: this is the language of Lacanian sublimation. For both Hegel and Lacan, the sublime object is an “object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing”; in both cases, we are dealing with “a miserable ‘little piece of the Real,’” a pathetic object that “fills out the empty place of the Thing as the void, as the pure Nothing of absolute negativity.”<sup>48</sup>

It may seem strange—ridiculous, even—to characterize Moby Dick as a “little piece” of anything. Is not the entire novel a testament to his grandeur? While Moby Dick is unquestionably sublime in the more traditional Burkean and Kantian senses, for Ahab, to invoke one of Žižek’s definitions of the *objet petit a*, he is sublime on account of his possessing some “mysterious *je ne sais quoi*,” some “unfathomable ‘something,’” the presence of which “transposes [him] into an alien.”<sup>49</sup> Once again, in the case of Moby Dick, the mysterious, unfathomable “something”—in the language of Ahab, the “inscrutable thing”—that is in the White Whale more than the White Whale himself is his evil reason, his “unexampled, intelligent malignity” (159).

The *objet petit a*, however, is not only in the *object* more than the object itself. Though an external manifestation of the subject’s desire, the *objet petit a* is also in the *subject* more than the subject itself. As Lacan explains, the *objet petit a* is something that is “strange to me, although it is at the heart of me,” an “intimate exteriority” for which he coined the neologism “extimacy.”<sup>50</sup> As Žižek puts it, troping on a common theme from science fiction, the *objet petit a* is something from “inner space,” a “strange body in my interior which is ‘in me more than me,’ which is radically interior and at the same time already exterior.”<sup>51</sup> What the *objet petit a* thus reveals is that, at its most elementary, the subject is itself an object, an anamorphic little piece of the Real.

As the extimate object which, though just as much outside as inside of the subject, nonetheless constitutes the core of its being, the *objet petit a* is that which, in the language of Lacan, forever “bars” the subject, a barring represented by Lacan via the following formula:  $\$ \diamond a$ . As this formula suggests, though the *objet petit a* bars the subject, this barring is nonetheless constitutive of the subject. For Lacan, subjectivization occurs through the subject’s own division, its own splitting, as to the extimate object, the *objet petit a*, the result being that subjectivity as such is hysterical. And it is precisely this hysterization of the subject—a hysterization

that results from the subject tying itself to the *objet petit a*—that accounts for what Freud termed “death drive” and what Lacan, abolishing the difference between Eros and Thanatos, life drive and death drive, simply termed “drive,” a “traumatic imbalance” at the core of the subject that renders “man as such . . . ‘nature sick unto death,’ derailed, run off the rails though a fascination with a lethal Thing.”<sup>52</sup>

Such a description can’t help but call to mind “iron-way” Ahab, whom Ishmael continually refers to as “frantic” and “crazy,” and who continually calls into question his own identity. As Ahab asserts in just one of the many passages which suggest that the malignancy he sees in *Moby Dick* is an anamorphic projection of his own diabolism—a passage that comes mere lines before his aforementioned exclamation, “Naught’s an obstacle, naught’s an angle to the iron way!”: “I’m demoniac, I am madness maddened! . . . Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereupon my soul is grooved to run” (147). The toll that this pursuit of the *objet petit a* takes on Ahab—a pursuit that, again, perfectly illustrates the logic of the (death) drive—is best sketched by Ishmael in the following poignant description of Ahab’s nightly outbursts from his cabin:

At such times, crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the white whale; this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the agent that so caused him to burst from it in horror again. The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him; and in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it for its outer vehicle or agent, it spontaneously sought escape from the scorching contiguity of the frantic thing, of which, for the time, it was no longer an integral. But as the mind does not exist unless leagued with the soul, therefore it must have been that, in Ahab’s case, yielding up all his thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose; that purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own. Nay, could grimly live and burn, while the common vitality to which it was conjoined, fled horror-stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth. Therefore, the tormented spirit that glared out of bodily eyes, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room, was for the time but a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being, a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself. (174–75)

No other passage in the novel better exemplifies the extimate relation between subject and object—not only their splitting, but also their im-

brication, the blurring of the line between the two. In this instance, the scorchingly contiguous object, the “frantic thing” from inner space born of Ahab’s monomania, his “one supreme purpose,” itself becomes a subject, an “independent being of its own” that forces Ahab’s “common vitality,” his soul, to flee in horror, thus leaving him but a “blankness,” a “vacated thing.”<sup>53</sup> Thing becomes subject and subject becomes thing, a problematic that returns toward the end of the novel in a famous passage from chapter 132, “The Symphony” (the chapter that immediately precedes the three-day chase of *Moby Dick*), in which Ahab, in an enactment of the Lacanian “*Che vuoi?*” hysterically questions his own identity:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? (444–45)

The standard way of reading this passage is to view it as yet another instance of the dialectic between fate and free will throughout the novel, one in which fate is granted the upper hand. Such a reading is supported by Ahab’s assertion to Starbuck shortly thereafter, on the evening of day two of the chase, that “this whole act’s immutably decreed. ’Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates’ lieutenant; I act under orders” (459). Yet while this reading is correct to a point, the true split suggested by these passages is less that between fate and free will than that between subject and object, between the subject and its extimate, objectal correlative, for it is not so much God or the Fates that turn Ahab “round and round . . . like yonder windlass” (445), as he exclaims to Starbuck in the lines immediately following the block quote, as it is *Moby Dick*’s evil reason, the “inscrutable, unearthly thing” in Ahab more than Ahab himself. This is why Ahab’s quest is ultimately less a quest between good and evil than between evil and evil. When Ahab, in a precursor to his famous near-to-final words, “from hell’s heart I stab at thee” (468), asserts that he will wreak his hate upon *Moby Dick*, such an assertion borders on the tautological, for to stab *Moby Dick* is for Ahab to stab himself. Thus, that Ahab dies tethered to *Moby Dick*—a perfect literalization of his barred subjectivity vis-à-vis the *objet petit a*—is as fitting a death for him as Lacan could ever ask.<sup>54</sup>

Melville's Transcendental Materialism; or,  
*Moby-Dick's* Subject Lesson

This discussion of Ahab's objectal status may at first blush seem to dovetail with and reinforce currently ongoing attempts, especially in literary and cultural studies, to "decenter" and thereby demote the subject by "'horizontalizing' . . . the ontological plane."<sup>55</sup> What proponents of such a "flat ontology" posit, to take Levi Bryant as a paradigmatic example of this type of new materialist/realist thinking, is that "there is only one type of being: objects."<sup>56</sup> "Plac[ing] all entities on equal ontological footing," Bryant envisions a "democracy of objects," a "heteroverse or pluri-verse" in which the subject, no longer retaining the "privileged, central, or foundational place within philosophy and ontology" it has enjoyed since at least Descartes and especially after Kant, is merely "one object among many others."<sup>57</sup> The upshot of this decentering of the subject is that "we get a variety of nonhuman actors unleashed in the world as autonomous actors in their own right, irreducible to representations and freed from any constant reference to the human where they are reduced to our representations"—what, in short, Quentin Meillassoux terms "correlationism."<sup>58</sup> Such an "ontological realism" is proximate to the type of "vital materialism" that Jane Bennett proposes in her new materialist manifesto, *Vibrant Matter*—a "'thing-power' materialism," as she elaborates elsewhere, that understands matter not as an inert plenitude, but as "an active principle" which, "though it inhabits us and our inventions, also acts as an outside or alien power."<sup>59</sup> For Bennett, as for Bryant, the post-Cartesian conception of subjectivity, especially as radicalized by Kant and Hegel—a subjectivity founded upon such classic notions as self-consciousness, self-positing autonomy, free will, and so on—not only obscures "the capacity of things . . . to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" that often "impede or block the will and designs of humans," but also "feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption."<sup>60</sup>

Through its respective engagement with and anticipation of the dual discourses of sublimity and sublimation, *Moby-Dick* demonstrates that the subject posited by Kant, Hegel, and Lacan was never self-conscious, self-positing, or autonomous in any common or facile sense of these terms. Despite Ahab's hubristic fantasies of conquest and consumption—what scholarship on the novel typically characterizes as his totalitarian "will to power"—he is ultimately propelled down the iron way not by the force of his own iron will, but by the "alien power" of the sublime object.<sup>61</sup> In this regard, Melville was just as interested in the ability of objects to impede—or determine—the will and designs of humans as today's new

materialists and realists. Yet his prescient portrayal of the logic of sublimation suggests less that idealist or psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity obscure or distort the vitality of objects than that the vitality of objects—their “thing-power”—is itself the result of a certain distortion, of the distorted, anamorphic gaze generated by the subject’s fear and desire. Indeed, if we view the *objet petit a* as a privileged example of vibrant matter—which, insofar as it functions as a prime illustration of the new materialist mantra that “matter becomes,” I think it safe to do—it follows that not only is there “no I without *a*,” as Žižek more axiomatically renders Lacan’s aforementioned formula for the subject’s barring vis-à-vis the *objet petit a* ( $\$ \diamond a$ ), but so too is there no *a* without I, no vibrant matter without the little piece of the Real that is the subject.<sup>62</sup> From this vantage point, the new materialist/realist quest for “a finally subjectless object” may prove just as quixotic as Ahab’s.<sup>63</sup>

## Notes

1. See Barbara Glenn, “Melville and the Sublime in *Moby-Dick*,” *American Literature* 48, no. 2 (1976): 165–82; and Bryan Wolf, “When Is a Painting Most Like a Whale? Ishmael, *Moby-Dick*, and the Sublime,” in *New Essays on Moby-Dick*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 141–80.

2. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), 167, 169. All subsequent citations will appear parenthetically in the text.

3. For the classic reading of the dynamic between Ishmael and Ahab as one between good and evil, Eros and Thanatos, see Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966).

4. With regard to Melville, though he certainly knew of Hegel—as evidenced by a journal entry from October 22, 1849, in which he writes of having “talked metaphysics continually, & Hegel, Schlegel, Kant &c” with acquaintance George Adler, a professor of German literature and philosophy at New York University—it is unlikely that he read much, if any, of Hegel’s actual writings. He certainly would not have read the *Aesthetics*, the first English translations of which did not begin appearing until the 1880s. If anything, he might have read the brief selections from the *Philosophy of History* that Frederic Henry Hedge excerpted in his popular 1848 anthology *Prose Writers of Germany*, a book owned by Melville contemporaries such as Emerson and Whitman. With regard to Lacan, though he may very well have read some Melville, there are no explicit mentions of him or any of his works in either the *Écrits* or the Seminars. The only allusion to Melville in any of Lacan’s published texts is that by his son-in-law, Jacques-Alain Miller, in his introduction to the posthumously published *Television*, wherein Miller, in attempting to provide a specifically American example of the Lacanian notion of Woman as Thing (*das Ding*), makes the following remarks: “If I try to illustrate the



Lady, the inhuman partner, by drawing upon [American] mythology, what do I come across? Moby Dick, of course! And Ahab's leg is not such a bad example to show that castration . . ." As I have suggested, however interesting, the tracing of such literal connections between these three figures ultimately falls outside the purview of this chapter. Herman Melville, *Journals*, vol. 15 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Howard C. Horsford and Lynn Horth (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press; Chicago: Newberry Library, 1989), 8; Jacques-Alain Miller, "Microscopia: An Introduction to the Reading of *Television*," trans. Bruce Fink, in Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Norton, 1990), xv.

5. See Adrian Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), as well as "From Critique to Construction: Toward a Transcendental Materialism," which is the postface to his *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume One: The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2013). See also Johnston's *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008), wherein Johnston, as the book's subtitle suggests, began developing the core principles of what would become his transcendental materialism.

6. Donald E. Pease, *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 244, 238.

7. *Ibid.*, 239, 238

8. John Becker, "The Inscrutable Sublime and the Whiteness of Moby Dick," in *The Sublime (Bloom's Literary Themes)*, ed. Blake Hobby (New York: Chelsea House, 2010), 217.

9. Kant often uses the phrase "mere appearance" to characterize the phenomenal's relation to the noumenal. The following passage from the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* is typical in this regard: "If we view the objects of the senses as mere appearances, as is fitting, then we thereby admit at the very same time that a thing in itself underlies them, although we are not acquainted with this thing as it may be constituted in itself, but only with its appearance, i.e., with the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something." Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics: With Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Gary Hatfield (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 66.

10. Kant's repeated insistence upon our inability to access or to know things-in-themselves can be found not only throughout all three Critiques, but throughout many of his other works as well. Consider, for instance, the following passage from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: "Even with the most strenuous attentiveness and distinctness that the understanding may ever add, we can achieve only cognition of *appearances*, never of *things in themselves*. . . . Since they can never become known to us, but only ever how they affect us[,] we of ourselves [must] rest content with being unable to get any closer to them or ever to know what they are in themselves." Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 60.

11. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 116.

12. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Writings*, ed. Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 57. This particular definition of fanaticism goes a long way toward explaining Starbuck's charge of blasphemy against Ahab.

13. Nancy Fredericks, *Melville's Art of Democracy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 53–54. Fredericks's language here echoes Kant's.

14. *Ibid.*, 53.

15. See Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 45–65; Fredericks, *Melville's Art of Democracy*, 53–54. Though he doesn't discuss *Moby-Dick* in particular, Cavell sees literary romanticism in general as a response to the "bargain" struck by Kant in an attempt to "settle with skepticism (and dogmatism, or fanaticism)" and thereby "assure us that we do know the existence of the world, or rather, that what we understand as knowledge is *of* the world"—a bargain whose price, of course (a price too steep for many romantics), is that we "cede any claim to know the thing in itself, to grant that human knowledge is not of things as they are in themselves" (31).

16. Fredericks, *Melville's Art of Democracy*, 59.

17. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 205. For more on Hegel's critique of Kantian morality, see the discussion of diabolical evil in note 36, below.

18. *Ibid.*, 204–5.

19. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 380, 76–77.

20. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 115; Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 77, 482–83. As Hegel, again echoing Kant, puts matters elsewhere in the *Aesthetics*: "[The Idea] cannot find in concrete appearance any specific form corresponding completely with this abstraction and universality. But in this non-correspondence the Idea transcends its external existence instead of having blossomed or been perfectly enclosed in it. This flight beyond the determinateness of appearance constitutes the general character of the sublime" (303).

21. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 204, 205.

22. *Ibid.*, 205.

23. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 363–64; emphasis added.

24. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 206.

25. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 378, 76; emphasis added.

26. Paul de Man, "Hegel on the Sublime," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 116.

27. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 206. As Žižek elaborates elsewhere, Hegel's claim that "'the Suprasensible is appearance *qua* appearance' does not simply mean that the Suprasensible is not a positive entity *beyond* phenomena, but the inherent power of negativity which makes appearance 'merely an appearance' [Kant], that is, something that is not in itself fully actual, but condemned to perish in the process of self-sublation. It also means that the Suprasensible is

effective only as redoubled, self-reflected, self-related appearance: the Suprasensible comes into existence in the guise of an appearance of Another Dimension which interrupts the standard normal order of appearances *qua* phenomena.” Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), 196–97.

28. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 208. For a superb extended discussion of the relevance of this crucial line (“the *being of Spirit is a bone*”) not only to the concept of “infinite judgment” in particular, but also to Hegel’s theory of subjectivity more broadly, see Mladen Dolar, “The Phrenology of Spirit,” in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1994), 64–83.

29. De Man, “Hegel on the Sublime,” 110.

30. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 378.

31. Burke often invokes this idea of “transcendence downward,” but his most extensive discussion of it can be found in his essay on Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 240–53.

32. John Bryant, *Melville and Repose: The Rhetoric of Humor in the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 215.

33. *Ibid.*, 217.

34. I am here invoking the language of fetishistic disavowal, the classic formulation of which, as identified by Octave Mannoni, is “I know very well, but all the same . . .” See Mannoni, “‘I Know Well, but All the Same . . .,’” trans. G. M. Goshgarian, in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis A. Foster, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 68–92. For a classic Freudian reading of *Moby-Dick* and fetishism—one that focuses heavily on castration anxiety—see David Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

35. Bryant, *Melville and Repose*, 213.

36. *Ibid.*, 214. As Bryant asserts, “Ahab does not match this [transcendental] ontology with a corresponding transcendental ethics or aesthetics” (214). With regard to Ahab’s ethics, for instance, Bryant correctly suggests that by interpreting *Moby Dick*’s ostensible malice as a symbol of “a malignancy in reason,” an “evil reason” (214), Ahab violates Kant’s metaphysics of morality, according to which an evil reason—Kant’s very definition of “diabolical evil”—is impossible. Here, however, is where the turn to Hegel is necessary, for, as Žižek points out, Hegel saw the “terrorist potential” of Kant’s deontological ethics to fruition by “elevating Evil into an ethical principle,” conceiving of it not as an external, “positive counterforce” to the good (Kant’s view) but rather as a force that “*undermines it from within, by way of assuming [its] very form.*” What this means is that for Hegel diabolical evil is not only possible, but, even more disturbing, it is also indistinguishable from the highest good, from the non-pathological ethical act. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 101, 99.

37. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 234.

38. See, for instance, Stanley Geist, *Herman Melville: The Tragic Vision and the Heroic Ideal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939); and, more recently, Christopher Sten, "Threading the Labyrinth: *Moby-Dick* as Hybrid Epic," in *A Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Wyn Kelley (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), 408–22.

39. See Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). What Cavell calls "disowning knowledge" is in many regards proximate to fetishistic disavowal. Indeed, Cavell specifically invokes Freud when, in what constitutes the best definition of disowning knowledge, he claims that "Shakespeare's dramas, like Freud's, propose our coming to know what we cannot just not know" (191).

40. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 112. As Žižek explains, Lacan's use of the term "Thing" is intended to invoke both the Kantian Thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) and the Freudian Thing (*das Ding*), the impossible-incestuous object. See Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 181.

41. See Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 12.

42. Sara Murphy, "Anamorphosis," in *A Compendium of Lacanian Terms*, ed. Huguette Glowinski, Zita Marks, and Sara Murphy (New York: Free Association, 2001), 14. For Lacan, the quintessential example of anamorphosis is Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, which features a skull at the bottom center of the canvas that, when looked at straightforwardly, appears as a strangely elongated blot or stain, but which comes into relief when one "looks awry" at the painting from either the lower left or upper right side of it. See chapter 11 of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, "Courtly Love as Anamorphosis."

43. See Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 9.

44. Countless critics have commented on the resonances between *King Lear* and *Moby-Dick*, but the most exhaustive account is Julian Markels's *Melville and the Politics of Identity: From King Lear to Moby-Dick* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

45. It is here worth citing the sequel, as it were, to Starbuck's earlier dismissal of *Moby Dick* as a "dumb brute," a "dumb thing"—a sequel that occurs just moments before Ahab is dragged to his death by *Moby Dick*: "Oh! Ahab, . . . not too late is it, even now, the third day to desist. See! *Moby Dick* seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!" (465). The tragedy, of course, is that Starbuck is unable to convince Ahab to see rightly.

46. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 339.

47. *Ibid.*, 76–77.

48. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 206–7.

49. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: Norton, 2006), 67, 66; Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 17. Dennis Williams, in what, to my knowledge, is the only other extended Lacanian reading of the novel,

likewise interprets Moby Dick as the *objet petit a*; yet, in a crucial oversight, he fails to differentiate between the *objet petit a* as the cause of desire and the *object-cause* of desire—a cause which I am associating with Moby Dick's evil reason. See Williams, "Filling the Void: A Lacanian Angle of Vision on *Moby-Dick*," in *Ungraspable Phantom: Essays on Moby-Dick*, ed. John Bryant, Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, and Timothy Marr (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2006), 61–80.

50. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 71, 139.

51. See Slavoj Žižek, "The Thing from Inner Space," in *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 216–59; Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 180.

52. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 181.

53. Though she doesn't use the Lacanian language of extimacy, Sharon Cameron, in her magisterial reading of the novel, interprets this very same passage as an account of the "birth" of the *Pequod's* demonic fourth mate, Fedallah. As "[a] man birthed in Ahab's dreams," born "out of Ahab's mind," Fedallah, Cameron argues, is "that part of [Ahab] which exists outside of himself." Sharon Cameron, *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 41, 65, 54. For an extended reading of Fedallah along these lines—one that interprets him as the extimate, excremental materiality of the drive—see my "Object-Disoriented Ontology; or, the Subject of *What IS Sex?*" *Continental Thought and Theory* 2, no. 2 (2018): 35–57.

54. This is to say nothing of Ahab's ivory leg, nor of the "lively whit[e]," "rod-like mark" (110) that brands his face and neck, earning him the moniker of "Old Thunder" (86). Such markings, especially the former, are likewise literalizations of Ahab's barring, or, to use an even more apropos term, his castration.

55. Levi Bryant advocates for a "decentering" of the subject throughout his book *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities, 2011). The phrase "'horizontalizing' the ontological plane"—a phrase that consciously channels Bruno Latour—is from Jane Bennett, "Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Philosophy," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 230.

56. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 20. Bryant adopts the term "flat ontology" from Manuel DeLanda; see DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

57. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 24, 279, 22.

58. *Ibid.*, 22–23. For Meillassoux on correlationism, see his *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008).

59. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 18; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); and Bennett, "A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 47.

60. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii–ix. Compare to Bryant: "In an age where we are faced with the looming threat of monumental climate change, it is irrespon-

sible to draw our distinctions in such a way as to exclude nonhuman actors.” *The Democracy of Objects*, 24. This ecological dimension of contemporary neovitalist thought is perhaps best demonstrated in the work of one of today’s leading literary ecocritics, Timothy Morton.

61. The classic reading of Ahab along these lines is that of F. O. Matthiessen, who claims that in Ahab Melville not only created “a fearful symbol of the self-enclosed individualism that, carried to its furthest extreme, brings disaster both upon itself and upon the group of which it is part,” but also provided “an ominous glimpse of what was to result when the Emersonian will to virtue became in less innocent natures the will to power and conquest.” F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: University Press, 1941), 459.

62. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in *New Materialisms*, 10; Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 599.

63. “Towards a Finally Subjectless Object” is the title of the introductory chapter of *The Democracy of Objects*. Bryant here tropes on Alain Badiou’s notion of “a finally objectless subject.” See Badiou, “On a Finally Objectless Subject,” in *Who Comes after the Subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 24–32.



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Responding to the ongoing "objectal turn" in contemporary humanities and social sciences, the essays in *Subject Lessons* present a sustained case for the continued importance—indeed, the indispensability—of the category of the subject for the future of materialist thought. Approaching matters through the frame of Hegel and Lacan, the contributors to this volume, including the editors, as well as Andrew Cole, Mladen Dolar, Nathan Gorelick, Adrian Johnston, Todd McGowan, Bornha Radnik, Molly Anne Rothenberg, Kathryn Van Wert, and Alenka Zupančič—many of whom stand at the forefront of contemporary Hegel and Lacan scholarship—agree with neovitalist thinkers that material reality is ontologically incomplete, in a state of perpetual becoming, yet they maintain that this is the case not in spite of but, rather, *because of* the subject. Incorporating elements of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literary and cultural studies, *Subject Lessons* contests the movement to dismiss the subject, arguing that there can be no truly robust materialism without accounting for the little piece of the Real that is the subject.



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